

KLEINE DREIGROSCHENMUSIK

Kurt Weill

1. Overture
2. Moritat von Mackie Messer
3. Anstatt-Dass Song
4. Die Ballade vom angenehmen Leben
5. Pollys Lied
6. Tango-Ballade
7. Kanonen-Song
8. Dreigroschen-Finale

Copyright by the
Estate of David
Drew.

Most suites from stage works are simply expedient collections of available pieces. But a few are compositions in their own right: and the Suite from The Threepenny Opera is one of them. The music for Brecht's adaptation of The Beggar's Opera was written in the summer of 1928, and the work was first performed with extraordinary success in September of that year. The Suite followed some four months later. It was heard for the first time at the Berlin Opera Ball — approximately the equivalent of the old Chelsea Arts Ball — in February 1929, when it was played by members of the Prussian State Orchestra under Otto Klemperer.

The practice of basing serenade-like suites for wind orchestra on the scores of successful operas and singspiels was common in Mozart's day, and Mozart himself indulged in it — if only (he suggests) to stop some thief forestalling him. Although that kind of problem does not (or should not) exist for composers who enjoy copyright protection, one might imagine that Weill's main purpose in making the Suite was just as commercial as that of his 18th-Century predecessors. But the score tells another story. In the first place, the instrumentation already made the Suite quite unsuitable for normal concert conditions at that time; secondly, even if the instrumentation had not been so predictable an obstacle, the character and above all the structure of the Suite were manifestly contrary to the interests of easy marketability, in either the 'serious' or the 'light' fields, as they then were. In fact, the Suite was seldom heard in Weill's lifetime, and did not begin to be widely performed until quite recently — that is, until patterns of concert-giving inherited from earlier and very different ages began to break up, either of their own accord or under deliberate pressure.

Although it might be argued that a criticism of those patterns is already implicit in the form of the Suite, musical considerations are paramount, and one must beware of hindsight (with due allowance for Weill's foresight). If, for instance, Weill's manner of introducing a tune now known to countless millions strikes us as peculiarly comic, it is worth recalling that the peculiarity, if not the comedy, is one of history's pleasant accidents; for in Weill's day the tune had attracted little attention. The 'hits' that would have been recognized by the guests of the Opera Ball were the Tango-Ballade and the Kanonen-Song.

And how brilliantly Weill integrates them in the Suite! He has so placed them that their different kinds of darkness — sensual in the Tango, social in the Kanonen-Song — are dramatized by the musical form, while any spurious 'hit' quality attached to them by the processes of popularization is stripped away. The ensuing Finale is the crowning master-stroke: Weill ignores everything in the theatre-score's finale apart from the closing chorale,

which he prefaces with the darkest music in the entire score. Thus the implications of the Overture are fulfilled even more clearly than they are in the stage work, and the eight 'separate' numbers of the Suite are seen to form two balancing and contrasting spans which meet in the pure lyricism of No. 5, 'Pollys Lied'.

Pure lyricism? Surely Brecht's poem is a parody and Polly a petty-bourgeois sentimentalist? And anyway — say the very rare theatre producers who have a musical ear — just find me a good cast that can manage even half of what Weill expects of them! And whose fault is that? After all, *The Threepenny Opera* is not even an operetta: it's a play with music, written and composed for actors. And if the acting is lousy, a cast of Carusos couldn't save it.

Which is true; and perhaps the main reason why Weill interrupted urgent work on his three-act opera *Mahoganny* in order to prepare a means of hearing some of his *Threepenny Opera* music under conditions which could not be remotely approached in the theatre.

David Drew 1974