

In September, 1935 Weill (1900–1950) travelled to America for the first time in order to oversee the staging of his and Franz Werfel's biblical drama *The Eternal Road*, which was due to be performed early the following year. Owing to the indefinite postponement of that production, he decided to remain in New York temporarily. It was not until the summer of 1937 that he took the first steps towards American citizenship.

While trying to earn his keep in New York, Weill consolidated his links with the Group Theater. In the spring of 1936 he was invited to collaborate with the Group Theater on a musical play whose subject he himself was to chose. He recommended an American version of Hasek's *Good Soldier Svejk*. With this in view, the Group Theater introduced him to the distinguished playwright Paul Green, a life-long experimenter in new forms (and a pioneer of

open-air theatre in North Carolina). The result of this collaboration was *Johnny Johnson*, which was written and composed in the summer of 1936 and staged for the first time that December, in New York.

Although the production was hardly more to the taste of the Broadway public than *The Threepenny Opera* had been three years earlier, the press was highly favourable. Among the theatrical intelligentsia in New York Weill's already high reputation was consolidated; and in recent years *Johnny Johnson* has found increasing acceptance as one of the classics of American music theatre.

The fact that Weill's score, like the play, is far removed from the Broadway style of the day is as apparent as is the relationship with Weill's two 'Berlin' musicals for the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm. Weill himself acknowledges this relationship by

means of several brief and functional quotations—one from *The Threepenny Opera* and the remainder (including a complete melody) from *Happy End*. The latter is indeed the direct forebear of *Johnny Johnson*. It contains the most outspokenly 'American' song Weill composed in Germany. However, in *Johnny Johnson*, the range of American reference is much wider than anything implicit in the earlier work's 'Song of the Hard Nut.'

Though still consciously composing as a European, Weill recalls, with a smile, the American hits of World War I, evoking the times when America was singing George M. Cohan's 'Over There' and patriotic ditties with such titles as 'Good Luck to the USA,' 'The Ragtime Volunteers are off to War' and 'Au Revoir but not Goodbye Soldier Boy.' Weill's own 'Farewell Song' is characteristically double-edged—on

the one hand a brilliant persiflage of such songs (and incidentally the first 'blues' he wrote on American soil); on the other, the work of a composer who understood, as well as any, the manifold ironies of *Così fan tutte*.

*War Play* was devised in consultation with Paul Green, as one of the elements in a so-called *Kurt Weill Portrait* mounted by the Berlin Festival in 1975. As the title suggests, it was confined to those numbers in the original show which relate directly to the war theme; and it was specifically intended for the second of two War and Peace programmes planned by the present author and performed at the Berlin Academy of Arts by a group of soloists and the London Sinfonietta conducted by David Atherton.

*War Play* is designed to complement *Johnny Johnson*, not in any way to compete with it. Al-

though its structure is independent of any *dramatis personae* other than the historical ones, and any narrative elements other than history itself, *War Play* inevitably follows the play's broad outline. For the work is determined by the musical and poetic content of the musical numbers—including those relevant and important numbers, such as the 'Farewell Song,' which were dropped by the Group Theater, or which, like 'Song of the Soldier's Mother' (Epitaph), remained in voice-and-piano score. Apart from Christopher Shaw's scoring of 'Song of the Soldier's Mother' and one transposition (upwards by a half-tone for

vocal reasons), the music remains exactly as Weill wrote it—an ideal which in normal theatre conditions is well-nigh unattainable. Paul Green's text for the songs and choruses are likewise preserved intact, but a German version has been supplied for 'Song of the Soldier's Mother.'

For the 1975 Berlin performances of *War Play*, a sequence of authentic documents from the years 1917-18 was culled from political speeches, newspaper items, advertisements, Wall Street reports, and so forth—as a thematically appropriate substitute for the elements of dramatic motivation provided by the play. The documents

were presented in the form of loudspeaker announcements, either between the numbers or in conjunction with purely instrumental music which had originally accompanied spoken dialogue or stylised action. The programme notes explained that the documentary elements (which are also being used, in a slightly different version, in the Boston Musica Viva performance) were *ad hoc*, and could be replaced by projections, film episodes, or indeed by whatever was felt appropriate to the music and the theme in any given circumstances.

©1988 by David Drew