

Kurt Weill: A Profile

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Whether we are accustomed to mentioning Weill in the same breath as Hindemith or as Holländer, as Copland or as Cole Porter; whether we see him as an outstanding German composer who somehow lost his voice when he settled in America, or as an outstanding Broadway composer who somehow contrived to write a hit show called *The Threepenny Opera* during his otherwise obscure and probably misspent Berlin youth; whether we disagree with both these views and either find evidence of a strikingly original mind at all stages in his career (but at some more than others), or dismiss him as nothing but a gifted amanuensis of Bertolt Brecht; whether we think of him as a 'product of his times' who had his one lucky strike with *Die Dreigroschenoper* and apart from that can safely be forgotten, or whether we believe him to be the creator of a substantial and durable body of work spanning twenty (or even thirty) years; whether we consider him incompetent to write anything but theatre music, or whether we number several of his non-theatrical pieces and at least one of his orchestral works (the Second Symphony) among his finest achievements; in short, whether we feel him to be important or negligible, whether we love his music or detest it, admire or despise it – we may rest assured that we are by no means alone, and that we will not need to look far for some eminent authority who shares our views.

Bertolt Brecht, for instance. His only published assessment of Weill appears in the essay 'On the Use of Music in the Epic Theatre', and indicates that until Brecht put him on the right track Weill had been composing 'relatively complicated music of a mainly psychological sort, but when he agreed to set a series of more or less banal song texts [i.e. the *Mahagonny-Gesänge*] he was making a courageous break with a prejudice which the solid bulk of serious composers stubbornly held'. Apart from the fact that Weill had started simplifying his music some considerable time before he met Brecht, and that even while he was composing 'relatively complicated music' he had, for his own and other people's amusement, written some

cabaret songs on texts at least as 'banal' as any of Brecht's for *Mahagonny*, nothing is more remarkable in his post-1920 music than its withdrawal from those areas that might loosely be described as 'psychological' – a bad word in Brecht's vocabulary, here presumably denoting a Straussian or even Schoenbergian ethos. In his theatrical works prior to the collaboration with Brecht, Weill had already dissociated most of the characters (or 'figures', to use Georg Kaiser's term) from their individually characteristic emotions, with the one significant exception of a 'public figure' (the Tsar in *Der Zar lässt sich fotografieren*) who is stripped down to his private, sensual, self; and in his non-theatrical works, Weill had concentrated on the moral, the religious, and the socio-political implications of his chosen texts or pretexts.

The fact that in these pre-Brecht years he concerned himself not only with the work of Georg Kaiser and Iwan Goll – both of whom Brecht admired – but also with Rilke, whose work Brecht disliked, and the Bible, is revealing only with reference to specific texts and to Weill's family background. A typically Reform-Jewish upbringing had been associated with parental influences that were in most respects liberal. Weill's was a literary as well as a musical family – his mother had wide literary interests, while his father was a Cantor and a composer of liturgical music – and Rilke figured prominently among the modern poets in a family library where the works of Goethe and Heine, of Johann Gottfried Herder and Moses Mendelssohn, had pride of place, and where, perhaps, one could have found some writings of Eduard Bernstein and perhaps even a crumpled copy of the Erfurt Programme of 1891.

Unlike Brecht, Weill never needed to repudiate his early background in order to define his artistic functions and objectives. Although it is true that he left the Jewish faith at an early stage in his adult life, there seems to have been no family dissension on that account. Settings of a penitential psalm and of the fifth chapter of the Lamentations of Jeremiah are perhaps the finest of his early works, and Rilke provided a convenient bridge from the Old Testament to the humanism that was the only faith Weill professed in later years except inadvertently – for instance in the chromatically twisted fragment of the *Dies irae* that runs through the first movement of the Violin Concerto, in the instrumental chorale of the *Mahagonny Songspiel* (and the baleful light it sheds on

the apparent blasphemy of 'Gott in Mahagonny'), in the Bachian imagery of parts of the *Berlin Requiem*, and even in the amazingly affectionate irony that distinguishes his settings of real or parodied Salvation Army texts in *Happy End*. But essentially it is in the etymological rather than the theological sense that Weill remained to the end of his life a 'religious' artist. The binding obligation of man to his fellow men and to society as a whole is implied by the title and inspiration of his most ambitious stage work, the three-act opera *Die Bürgschaft*; and it is the fundamental theme of all his major works and many of his lesser ones. It is even present in works such as *Happy End* or *One Touch of Venus* which purport to be 'mere' entertainments.

Some years ago I suggested that we should not worry ourselves about a precise evaluation of Weill's importance or lack of it. Too much had already been spoken and written about Weill while so much of the music was still waiting to be heard again. But without idly pleading the excuse that time alone will tell – for time alone does not tell anything other than the appalling lateness of the hour – I also suggested that we should at least remember with respect a human being whose qualities are reflected in his art: a just, loyal, and friendly man, who knew his own worth and yet dissociated himself from the contemporary cult of genius by preserving – as far as his characteristic irony allowed – a deceptively mild and self-effacing exterior in his everyday encounters; a man for whom democracy was a fundamental and humane truth which should inform every level of activity; a man profoundly aware of the tragedies and follies of his time, but one whose laughter could so convulse him – as he tried to mop away the tears – that it became quite noiseless; a man who was much loved.