

Der Ozeanflug (The Lindbergh Flight)

Robert Tear
 Neil Howlett
 Roger Stalman
 BBC Chorus
 Wandsworth School Boys' Choir

Weill composed *The Lindbergh Flight* in 1929. It is the second of the two cantatas on texts by Bertolt Brecht (the first being *Das Berliner Requiem*) which he wrote during the twelve months following the première of *The Threepenny Opera*. (In that same period he finished his three-act opera *Mahagonny*, and composed his score for *Happy End*.) The first performance was conducted by Otto Klemperer at a Berlin concert in December 1929, and was well received. In style the work derives from the *Berliner Requiem* and hence from the more 'classical' and austere passages in *Mahagonny*. It is far removed from the world of *The Threepenny Opera* or *Happy End*; and the allusions to popular music and jazz, which are commonly held to be typical of Weill, are confined to two short numbers. For the first time since 1925, Weill used an almost conventional orchestra; but from this are drawn various smaller ensembles. Orchestration is one of the elements that define the many and progressively illuminating relationships between the fifteen numbers. The idea of an upward and outward exploration from modest beginnings determines the total form.

When, in May 1927, Charles Lindbergh completed the first transatlantic solo flight, both hemispheres rejoiced as if at the dawn of a new age. No flying exploit of our own day has inspired such unquestioning enthusiasm; nor has any later explorer been so idolised by the general public or so fervently wooed by commerce and high society. In 'Lucky Lindbergh' the twentieth century discovered the embodiment of its simpler dreams, and show-business discovered a star greater than Hollywood's. The 'common man' who landed his frail craft at Le Bourget stepped out into a world that had cast him as Superman. In that respect, the Lindbergh of the popular imagination was foreign to everything Weill stood for. When Stokowski introduced his cantata to America, audiences were baffled and dismayed by the sombre and profoundly un-American tone of the music. Even

Berlin (which had yet to hear the *Berliner Requiem*) was surprised by it.

Although the music clearly dissociates itself from the heroic ethos, it neither satirises the protagonist nor reduces him to homely proportions. Except for a brief passage in the 'Snowstorm' number – where words and music express his sudden fear of death – he remains a remote figure whose character and emotions are not investigated. Thus the individual is overshadowed by, and finally enveloped in, the broader significance of his actions and of the public's response to them.

It was Weill's belief that art is incompatible with journalistic topicality but should none the less reflect the major ideas or events of its time. The necessity of finding a universal and, if possible, timeless context for contemporary subject-matter determines the tendency of his mature work and is frequently affirmed in his writings. 'Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*', he once wrote, 'is no less a mirror of our time than Chaplin's *Gold Rush*'. In *The Lindbergh Flight* he reverses Stravinsky's procedure. Actuality is robbed of its news value and pushed into the past, where it is allowed to merge with ritual and myth. In unmistakably personal terms Weill defines a historical perspective that extends back from his own age – represented by the first two numbers – through those of Liszt and Mendelssohn, and then of Bach and Handel, to that of plainsong and the *trouvères*.

Some Points of View

After the first two numbers, almost nothing about the character of the music could be guessed from a reading of Brecht's text. Even in the second number, where Lindbergh announces that he is an American and reveals his native courage, the 'jazzy' idiom is stressedly European and the brave tone stressedly unheroic. In the very next number Weill removes the protagonist not only from his home country but also from his century: Lindbergh sings of his flight kit in the tones of a priest

or cantor from Mussorgsky's time. Each new 'historical' allusion in the score has its own expressive and formal function. For instance, the cantata's second stage – the three ordeals of Fog, Snowstorm, and Fatigue – begins with a Fog chorus in the form of a neo-classical three-part invention. The counterpoint, so far from being nebulous, is extremely rigid, and in that sense analogous to Fog's philosophy, which, as Weill remarked, is nothing if not reactionary. The principal motive was a familiar tag long before Bach conceived the C minor fugue for the first book of the '48'; and yet it is repeatedly insisted upon, as if the riddle of life could be solved by proclaiming the unchallengeability of mere custom. Predictably, this pharisaic polyphony leads at last to an *ostinato* impasse. Fog needs a more active ally. So the menace latent in its obsessive yet muted music becomes manifest in the ensuing 'Snowstorm' number. But the greatest threat to the flyer – in Weill's view – is the enemy within. The hypnotic song of Sleep transforms motives from Lindbergh's opening 'jazz' number into a lullaby for some modern Mephistopheles to sing to Faust beside the banks of the Elbe.

Stage by stage the neo-classical and neo-romantic elements in the score are drawn ever more closely together until in the last two numbers they are united. The penultimate number is an orchestral *sinfonia* in C minor. It refers to the public rejoicings, but does not directly evoke them. The gravity of tone prepares for the finale, where the text's panegyrics are tellingly qualified by the music. A sense that man may 'raise himself up', only to fall from a greater height than before, is implicit in the profoundly thoughtful and chastening music of the middle section. Technological progress, we are reminded, is never a guarantee of progress in other fields.

Origins and Postscripts

The first and unpublished setting of Brecht's *Lindbergh* text was a joint composition for radio by Weill and Hindemith. In that form – with the numbers divided about equally between the two composers – it was presented at the 1929 summer festival of modern German music in Baden-Baden. Weill and Hindemith then withdrew their manuscripts. They had been competing rather than collaborating, and in a sense Weill had won the competition. But in producing, as he now did, a substantial cantata for concert performance, he was following his own inclination, not Brecht's. With good reason, Brecht did not take kindly to the idea of being a mere librettist. For him, the original *Lindbergh Flight* was a 'radio play', and music was at best a secondary consideration. So in 1930 he staked his own claim on the text, and published a revised and greatly expanded version entitled 'The Flight of the Lindberghs – a didactic radio play for boys and girls'. In function and significance, no less than in structure, it is an independent work. Whereas the text of *The Lindbergh Flight* is wholly unpolitical and is largely defined by Weill's music, *The Flight of the Lindberghs* is the work of a committed Marxist, and is in no sense a work of Weill's. Consequently Brecht felt able to make subsequent dispositions on his own account. In 1950 he wrote to a German radio station saying that 'in my radio play' the name of Lindbergh must be suppressed, and the title changed to '*Der Ozeanflug*', the 'ocean flight'. A new prologue – explaining that the aviator's pro-Nazi activities in the late 1930s necessitated these changes – was to be spoken at the outset. Weill was already on his deathbed, and apparently remained in ignorance of the correspondence.

David Drew

In conformity with current agreements relating to Brecht's measures of 1950, the title of Weill's cantata is here changed to Der Ozeanflug and the name of the protagonist is suppressed. Square brackets in the text following indicate the changes made by Brecht in the corresponding parts of his radio play.