

Kurt Weill (1900–50)
 Berlin Requiem (1928)

-
- 1 Ballade vom ertrunkenen Mädchen (Ballad of the Drowned Girl)
 - 2 Grabschrift: Die rote Rosa (Epitaph: Red Rosa)
 - 3 Erster Bericht über den Unbekannten Soldaten unter dem Triumphbogen (First Report on the Unknown Soldier Under the Triumphal Arch)
 - 4 Zweiter Bericht über den Unbekannten Soldaten unter dem Triumphbogen (Second Report on the Unknown Soldier Under the Triumphal Arch)
 - 5 Zu Potsdam unter den Eichen (Under the Oak Trees on the Road to Potsdam), orch. Walter Goehr
 - 6 Grosser Dankchoral (Great Thanksgiving Chorale)

HK Gruber *chansonnier*
 Garry Magee *baritone*
 Norbert Meyn *tenor*
 European Voices

In 1924, and only a few months after the start of public broadcasting in Germany, Kurt Weill became music correspondent of the weekly publication *Der deutsche Rundfunk* (the

equivalent of our *Radio Times*). Four years later he was the youngest of several well-known composers (among them Hindemith and Schreker) who were invited to write musical works specifically designed for broadcasting, and for the ever-widening radio audience. The scheme – possibly the first of its kind in the world – was sponsored by the German Broadcasting Authority and administered by the quasi-autonomous stations within its network. Though Weill had been working in close association with the Berlin station for years, and had already composed a substantial and much-admired score for its drama division, his commission came from Frankfurt, where the first performance of his ‘little cantata’ *Das Berliner Requiem* was given on 22 May 1929. It was to be the work’s only performance in its composer’s lifetime.

In a prefatory note, Weill described his cantata as a ‘secular requiem’ that attempted to express the thoughts and feelings of ‘contemporary city-dwellers’ with regard to human mortality. He did not, however, refer to the 10th anniversary, in November 1928, of the end of the First World War, whose horrors are reflected in no less than three of the previously published Brecht poems that constitute the cantata’s text. Although he had been collaborating with Brecht since March

1927 – first on the opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, then on *The Threepenny Opera* – there is no evidence of a similar collaboration on the *Berlin Requiem*.

Weill had originally planned to open the work with a 10-minute setting (for bass voice and 10 wind instruments) of Brecht's 1918 poem 'Vom Tod im Wald' ('Concerning the Death in the Forest') which had been premiered at the Berlin Philharmonic in November 1927. But shortly before the cantata's premiere, he realised that the inclusion of the quasi-atonal *Vom Tod im Wald* would create too many structural problems and stylistic discrepancies. The premiere of the cantata had originally been announced for February 1929, but was postponed more than once until its actual premiere in May. The delays were due to objections raised by various watchdog committees. Recent research – notably by the German Weill scholar Nils Grosch – has revealed that one of the chief provocations was the inclusion of the Potsdam march, 'Zu Potsdam unter den Eichen' ('Under the Oak Trees on the Road to Potsdam').

Brecht's poem describes an anti-militarist procession whose central feature is a coffin daubed with the derisive legend 'A home for every warrior!'. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, just such a slogan might have appeared in the election manifesto of almost any German centre-right or centre-left party of the day. Ten years later, however, housing programmes to woo the votes of returning

servicemen were long forgotten, whereas the legend of an undefeated German army 'stabbed in the back' had taken root, and rumours of the Reichswehr's secret rearmament were rife. In such a climate, Brecht's Potsdam poem might well have had an incendiary effect. Although the Imperial censorship had been abolished and its apparatus dismantled by the republican constitution of 1919, freedom of expression was by no means unrestricted in the German media of the 1920s – especially where religious or political susceptibilities were at stake.

The brief tenor solo that follows tonight's opening number, 'Ballade vom ertrunkenen Mädchen' ('Ballad of the Drowned Girl') had originally been a setting of a memorial text for a young girl robbed of her innocence. After the 1929 premiere, Weill published the song with an alternative and highly political text – the 'Grabschrift' ('Epitaph') heard tonight – commemorating the pacifist and Spartakist leader Rosa Luxemburg, murdered in January 1919 by a group of extremist army officers after her arrest and brutal interrogation. Since her corpse had been found floating in Berlin's Landwehr canal, this alternative version of the text serves to relate the 'Red Rosa' of the 'Epitaph' to the anonymous 'drowned girl' of the preceding ballad.

Between 1929 and his hurried flight from Germany in March 1933, Weill had at least three further tries at establishing a definitive form for the cantata, seemingly without fully recognising the reasons for his unease. For in truth, an

unfinished state was the one that the work's very subject matter seemed to call for. In the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that no complete copy of his original score has survived, or that the principal casualty was the Potsdam march, which exists only in vocal score.

In 1967, the late Walter Goehr orchestrated the Potsdam march, with due regard for two crucial instrumental indications given in the vocal score: the low bells in the F minor funeral-march verse, and the tinkling celesta in the concluding C major refrain. The latter mimics the second of the two carillons commissioned in 1797 by Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia for the bell-tower of Potsdam's Baroque Garrison Church. Chiming at the half-hour, in reply to 'Lobet den Herrn' ('Praise the Lord') on the hour, the second carillon echoed the secular tones of a popular favourite composed by Mozart only a few years before – Papageno's aria 'Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen' from *The Magic Flute*. For the benefit of Potsdam's citizens and soldiers, the aria was soon furnished with a new text commending the virtues of loyalty and honour, and the carillon continued to sound for the next century and a half until a British bomb finally silenced it, just before the Nazi surrender in 1945.

In the double-edged irony of Weill's setting, the celesta's Mozartian message is immediately obliterated by the brute force and music-hall comedy of the wind orchestra's cadence to a C major refrain that has emerged from the modulatory scheme like the Potsdam constables

in their green uniforms – at once an authoritarian dominant, and dominant authority. Pure satire in the tradition of Heine, the Potsdam march is clearly at odds with Weill's official preview of the cantata as a 'serious and un-ironic succession of memorials, epitaphs and dirges'.

Unquestionably serious, on the other hand, is the concluding 'Grosser Dankchoral' ('Great Thanksgiving Chorale'). Whereas Brecht's poem uses the language and tone of Martin Luther for a systematic denial of Christianity's redemptive message, Weill meticulously avoids the Lutheran tradition so clearly evoked (only four months earlier) by the chorale that ended *The Threepenny Opera*. In the *Berlin Requiem* itself, the same tradition had been anticipated by the neo-Bachian recitative-and-aria of the baritone's 'Zweiter Bericht über den Unbekannten Soldaten' ('Second Report on the Unknown Soldier'). Pre-Christian in a way that Stravinsky would have appreciated precisely because the musical language is not at all Stravinskyan, the chorale is also exceptionally far-sighted. Whether or not it contains some premonition of the paganism that would become Nazi Germany's official religion in just over four years' time, it also and more significantly examines the black holes in its telescoped and modally estranged harmony. In the pure physics of its composition, the chorale already seems to convey some inkling of the expanding universe. Paradoxically, however, it also makes room for further metaphysical speculation.

The final vocal melisma on the word 'sterben' ('die') comes to rest on the barest of open fifths, a skeletal rendering of the already ambiguous harmony with which the guitar begins tonight's opening number, 'The Ballad of the Drowned Girl'. The open-endedness of the Chorale is also consistent with Weill's setting of the words 'ruhe sanft' ('rest in peace') at the end of the following 'Grabschrift' ('Red Rosa'), which leads on to the *Berlin Requiem's* secularised 'Dies irae', the first of the two 'Reports on the Unknown Soldier'. Even as the chorus is singing 'ruhe sanft', the music identifies a wish that would only have been fulfillable in the context and faith of a traditional 'Agnus Dei'. The victim commemorated in 'Red Rosa' is one who would never 'rest in peace'. Although the names of the army officers responsible for her murder were a matter of public knowledge, none of the principal culprits was ever brought to book, and their junior accomplices were either lightly sentenced for trivial offences, or allowed to escape.

Justice is among the unnamed victims mourned by a Requiem whose true end – the 'Great Thanksgiving Chorale' – may also, as Weill recognised, serve as its false beginning. Poised mid-way between the 1918 Armistice and the outbreak of the Second World War, the cantata expressly repudiates the afterlife as if better to train its eyes on near and distant futures. Only four years after the attempt to suppress the Potsdam march, the aged President Hindenburg would receive a soberly dressed and

statesmanlike Adolf Hitler at the doorway of Potsdam's Garrison Church. Such was the opening ceremony on the Day of Potsdam, held on 21 March 1933 in celebration of Hitler's election victory. Early on that same day, Weill had left Berlin by car, heading for France; and well before the Day of Potsdam had reached its appointed climax – a massive torchlight parade in front of that ultimate symbol of Prussian militarism, the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin – Weill was safely across the French border. A few days later, the Mozartian carillon proclaiming 'loyalty and honesty' from the bell-tower of Potsdam's Garrison Church was adopted by the Propaganda Minister's radio network as one of its station call-signs; and, seven long years later, Hitler's victory parade in Paris reached its predestined culmination at the Arc de Triomphe.

Previously at the Proms

The only previous Proms performance of the *Berlin Requiem* was in 1985, when David Atherton conducted the London Sinfonietta and Voices, with soloists Philip Langridge, Stephen Roberts and Michael Rippon. The three-part concert also included Weill's *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik* and works by Janáček, Birtwistle and Bartók.

David Harman