

The score of *Propheten* was the last that Weill composed in Europe, and also his last extensive setting of a German-language text. Its musical perspectives are exceptionally wide: on the one hand, they afford a means of reviewing every one of his major compositions from the *Mahagonny* opera (1927–29) to *The Seven Deadly Sins* and the Second Symphony (1933); on the other, they look forward to his very last stage work for Broadway, the ‘musical’ *Lost in the Stars* (1949) which he and Maxwell Anderson based on Alan Paton’s anti-Apartheid novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

*Propheten* (Prophets) was intended to be the culmination of *Der Weg der Verheissung* (The Road of Promise), a vast four-act epic of the Jewish people, to a text by Franz Werfel and with direction by Max Reinhardt, and a work which has yet to be staged in its original German-language form. When the American version known as *The Eternal Road* finally reached the stage of the Manhattan Opera House in January 1937, no discernible trace of *Propheten* or its protagonist Jeremiah remained. Although a three-act version of *The Eternal Road* (ending with the reign of King Solomon) already promised an unusually ‘full’ theatrical (if not operatic) evening, it was not Reinhardt’s famous stop-watch that had disqualified *Propheten* from inclusion; it was the style, the tone, and above all the subject-matter.

Yet it was precisely because the subject-matter of *Propheten* had seized Weill’s imagination from the very start that the score is so urgent in expression and taut in structure. By his own admission – and despite the acute pressures of time and the already inordinate length of the previous three acts – he had at several

crucial points in *Propheten* felt impelled to write music where none was expected by his collaborators.

Only at the very close, when Jeremiah is gone, did Weill appear to fall into step with Werfel and Reinhardt, by ending with nothing more than a lusty reprise of the march theme that had ‘wandered’ across the spaces of the first three acts. The real ending, however, had already been composed in the guise of the choral conclusion to Act 3 (The Kings) – a purely intuitive correction and displacement worthy of comparison with many similar feats in Handel’s operas and oratorios. The ‘join’ is seamless. The performing version of *Propheten* ends accordingly.

Throughout *Der Weg der Verheissung* Weill had been pitching his tent as close as he dared (and only he would have dared so much) to the popular oratorio conventions of the 19th century – beginning of course with Mendelssohn, but branching out to Gounod and Saint-Saëns and even the Honegger of *King David*. But it is in *Propheten* that the longer and deeper links with Handel and with the Bach of the Passions come to the fore, and begin to unite with those that may (to some ears) recall the Mahler of the Eighth Symphony.

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*Propheten* was heard for the first time at the Konzerthaus, Vienna, on 28 May 1998 – almost exactly fifty years after the new State of Israel had been proclaimed and Chaim Weizmann had been named as its first President. The anniversary was and remains strictly relevant: Weizmann (1874–1952) had played an important role in the preliminaries to *Der Weg der Verheissung*, and was in effect the inspiration of its orchestral sequel – an arrangement

of the 'Hatikvah' commissioned for performance (by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Koussevitzky) at a ceremonial dinner held in honour of Weizmann some six months before the official proclamation of the State of Israel.

'Hatikvah' is Hebrew for 'To Hope'. The fact that Weill's arrangement is in the same key as his setting of Isaiah's call to the Night Watchman at the start of *Propheten* is no mere coincidence, but simply the first of several reasons why his clairvoyant arrangement sounds uncannily like a long-lost prelude to *Propheten*. It is adopted as such in tonight's performance.

Borrowed from the Moldavian folk song made famous by Smetana's tone-poem *Má vlast* and fitted to pre-existing verses by Naftali Herz Imber, the 'Hatikvah' had been the anthem of the modern Zionist movement almost since its inception soon after the publication in 1896 of Theodor Herzl's *The Jewish State (Der Judenstaat)*. Weizmann had been a Zionist from the start; and, as a naturalised British citizen working for the Admiralty during the First World War, he had helped frame the Balfour Declaration, pledging the British Government's support for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

In November 1933 – while serving as President of the English Zionist Federation during a brief interlude between his two ten-year presidencies of the World Zionist Organisation – Weizmann had received from an American colleague, Meyer Weisgal, a substantial cheque for forwarding to the Central Fund for the Relief of German Jewry. Born in Poland (like Weizmann) and trained as a journalist

(like Herzl), Weisgal was a devout idealist with entrepreneurial leanings. In July 1933, while editor of one of America's leading Zionist periodicals, he had produced for the Chicago World's Fair a vast open-air pageant depicting four millennia of Jewish history. Financially as well as politically, it had been an unqualified success.

Rather than try to repeat the success, Weisgal decided that, if a mere pageant without any 'artistic' pretensions could achieve so much, a genuine 'work of art' dealing with the same historical and Zionist themes, and addressed to the same wide public, would in the longer term achieve very much more. Even before his London meeting with Weizmann, he had decided that the mastermind must be the internationally renowned director Max Reinhardt – co-founder (together with Hugo von Hofmannsthal) of the Salzburg Festival, and director of the Deutsches Theater in Berlin until his dismissal by the Nazi authorities in March 1933.

Whether or not Weisgal was aware of the financial implications of collaborating with Reinhardt, Weizmann seems to have been instrumental in arranging an introduction to the British financier and industrialist Lord Melchett, son of Alfred Mond of ICI, and grandson of the German-born Ludwig Mond. From London Weisgal proceeded to Paris for talks with Reinhardt.

An agreement with Reinhardt was duly reached, but not without two concessions on Weisgal's part. His doubts about the wisdom of engaging for such a project the composer of the notorious *Threepenny Opera* (whose recent Broadway production had been a signal flop) were nothing compared to his

misgivings about Werfel. Famous and successful though he was, Werfel was also widely reputed to be on the verge of conversion to Roman Catholicism, while his formidable wife Alma was the widow of another Catholic convert, Gustav Mahler.

In June 1934 Weill, who had fled Germany in March 1933 and was then living outside Paris, was summoned to a meeting in Venice with Werfel, Reinhardt, Weisgal and Lord Melchett. Werfel had already begun work on the text of *Der Weg der Verheissung*, and Weill would have to complete a score of operatic dimensions within the next twelve months. The likely venue for the first production – and one that could accommodate not only the mass public that was to be aimed at, but also the five distinct stage-levels Werfel had in mind – was London's Royal Albert Hall.

Werfel completed his draft of *Der Weg der Verheissung* in September 1934. A year later, Ludwig Lewisohn's meticulous translation – now entitled *The Eternal Road* – was published by the Viking Press in New York. A prefatory note announced a premiere at the Manhattan Opera House in January 1936. But only a few days before the scheduled premiere, Weisgal's production-company was declared insolvent. Reinhardt left for Hollywood to complete his film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (starring James Cagney and Mickey Rooney), and Werfel returned to Europe.

Rather than resume his uncertain career in an increasingly threatened Europe, Weill decided to try his luck in America while the means of re-mounting *The Eternal Road* were being assembled. Exactly a year later, *The Eternal Road* – considerably

popularised and now, of course, shorn of *Propheten* – opened at the Manhattan Opera House amid a blaze of publicity and to general acclaim from the press and the public.

Reinhardt's grandiose production (with stage designs by Norman Bel Geddes) attracted large and enthusiastic audiences and enjoyed a continuous run for some eight months. But the running-costs were out of control from the start, just as the original investments had been a year before. With the 153rd performance, Weisgal's production-company went into liquidation for the second time, and *The Eternal Road* disappeared as if for ever, submerged in an ocean of debts and without having contributed a single cent to the charity – the Central Fund for the Relief of German Jewry – in whose aid it had been conceived four years earlier.

Unlike Weisgal, Reinhardt was neither religious nor a Zionist. From his strictly pragmatic point of view, Werfel's leanings towards Christianity and Rome were an advantage comparable to Weill's lifelong equivocacy. Weill seems to have abandoned the Jewish faith almost as soon as he had left the family home in Dessau – tied as it was to his father's post as chief cantor at the large local synagogue. But he had then opposed himself to the militant and typically 19th-century atheism of his beloved teacher, Ferruccio Busoni. After Busoni's death, subterranean religious influences acquire strictly secular significances in every one of Weill's dramatic compositions until the year of his flight from Germany.

Sentimentally to have identified himself with the Estranged One in *Propheten* would never have been characteristic of Weill. Yet the key familial

relationship in Werfel's epic was one that he well understood and had special reason to think about during the year in which he composed *Der Weg der Verheissung*.

Thanks in large measure to the international success of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996), it is now widely understood that eliminationist policies were inherent in Nazism from the very beginning, rather than a final paroxysm arising from Heydrich's Wannsee Conference in 1942.

The notion of genocide as a 'final solution' for the 'Jewish question' had been part of Hitler's legacy from 19th-century Vienna and from his own early frustrations in that city. His exposition of it in *Mein Kampf* (1924) was so blatant that the unbelievable was generally disbelieved, and the sequential progression from the brief violence and repressive legislation of spring 1933, through the overtly racist Nürnberg Laws of September 1935, to the so-called 'Reichskristallnacht' of November 1938, was seldom seen for what it was, namely part of the inexorable strategy. Intervening ameliorations and diversions (such as the crude appropriation of part of Herzl's plan for a Jewish home in Africa) were merely tactical manoeuvres designed to allay local and foreign concern and obfuscate the real issue.

Among the few Jewish and other intellectuals who grasped the underlying strategy was the distinguished novelist and commentator Ludwig Lewisohn, translator of *The Eternal Road*. Born in Berlin in 1882 and brought to the United States while still a child, he contributed his prophetic essay 'The



*'The wind is blowing from that book' (Propheten, Prologue): Kurt Weill, photographed by Karsh in his converted farmhouse in Rockland County during the winter of 1946-7.*

The composer is gazing at an atlas and is surely making plans for the momentous journey which – in May 1947 – will take him to Palestine and unite him with his parents for the first time in nearly twelve years.

Assault on Civilisation' to the volume *Nazism: An Assault on Civilisation*, which was published in New York in 1934, only a few months before he began work on *The Eternal Road*.

A year later, Weill's parents were still living in Leipzig, where his father Albert was now warden of a B'nai B'rith orphanage. Albert and his wife were staunch Zionists; and after receiving a favourable report from their daughter Ruth – who had been sent ahead on an exploratory mission – they left Germany in September 1935 and made a new home for themselves in Palestine. Nathan Weill, their eldest son, had left slightly before them with his wife – formerly an active Social Democrat – but they were to follow Weill to France, and settled in Palestine only later. The last of Weill's immediate family to leave Germany was his brother Hanns – as late as the spring of 1938, and in circumstances of personal danger.

Hanns Weill, who was intensely musical, had been the dedicatee of his brother's *Recordare* (1923), a large-scale unaccompanied motet for mixed voices, including children, setting the traditional passages from the Latin Vulgate version of the Lamentations of Jeremiah.

It is not the Lamentations that Werfel draws upon in *Propheten*, but principally the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah (with subsidiary passages from Isaiah, Chronicles and the Psalms). But the *Recordare* is, for Weill, still a shadowy presence in *Propheten*. Even more evident, though also more remote, is the long shadow cast by the Doomsday message of his early *Chorale Fantasie* – based on a Protestant hymn text dating from the Thirty Years War.

The paradox of an Expressionist classicism which Weill had hit upon in the *Chorale Fantasie* has left no mark on *Propheten*. It is characteristic of *Propheten* and its relationship to contemporary events (and future tragedies) that the culminating moment is not the orchestral thunderstorm that announces the destruction of the Second Temple, but the deep inwardness of the setting (for tenor and organ) of the famous words, 'A voice was heard in Rama, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children'.

The only widely familiar Jewish theme used by Weill in *Der Weg der Verheissung* is the 'Kol Nidrei', which makes its sole appearance in a dissonant form as the last agonised outcry of King David in Act 3. In *Propheten*, the most prominent traditional melody is 'Eli Tziyon' – used liturgically on the Ninth Day of Av, in commemoration of the destruction of the two temples. An ancient Ashkenazic melody, it is first introduced by Jeremiah after the reading of his words by the Ethiopian Ebed-Melech: it is then taken up, successively, by the Dark Angel, the two White Angels, and finally Rachel.

Several of Weill's own themes have a cyclic role throughout *Der Weg der Verheissung*. The first is the countermelody (vibraphone and organ) to the serene C major song of the Angel of the End of Time. It harks back to the beginning of Act 1 (The Patriarchs) – where God tells Abraham of his Promise to his Chosen People ('For I shall bless all who bless thee') – and looks forward to its *fortissimo* affirmation (by trumpets and trombones) at the climax of the Act 4 orchestral interlude (The Builders) and to its subsequent apotheosis in the final choral vision.



The densest web of reminiscences immediately precedes the 'Builders' interlude: as the vision of the Angel of the End of Time fades, the opening motif of Act 1 is recalled by the horns. The Thirteen-Year-Old then calls out to the sleepers huddled together in the House of Prayer, and as he starts to tell them of his vision, the orchestral strings recall the music associated with God's original Covenant with Abraham. Finally – after the King's Messenger delivers the expulsion order – the seven-bar bridge to 'The Builders' recalls Ruth's loyal pledge to Naomi ('Whither thou goest, I will go with thee').

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The premonitions and antennal sensitivities characteristic of Weill's art at most stages are never more apparent than in the critical years between 1930 and 1935. Some of his colleagues and contemporaries understood that very well. But what of later generations? With all the advantages and the burdens of hindsight – of being 'wise after the event' when the events themselves are still almost unimaginable – what sense may we now find in the insights and previsions that are central to *Propheten* and indeed to the Symphony, his second, which Weill had completed in Paris a year earlier?

Reinhardt and his advisors had good reason to believe that *Propheten* would be discomforting for American and Jewish audiences in 1936, and even more so a year later. For similar reasons, critics in pre-war New York and Amsterdam had poured scorn on the Second Symphony after Bruno Walter's loyal but (it seems) partly uncomprehending performances of it. Today, it is clear how far the Symphony

anticipated *Propheten*, and yet how great is the leap from the finale of the Symphony to the final section and the Epilogue of *Propheten*.

At precisely the point where Weill, as his own 'Watchman', interrupts the visionary jubilations and begins the Epilogue, we can hardly overlook what was still in store, in 1935, for synagogues and their communities throughout the continent of Europe. For present purposes, it is perhaps sufficient to recall that, in June 1941, German police battalions had herded hundreds and perhaps thousands of Jews into the main synagogue in Bialystok, bolted the doors, set fire to the building, and incinerated all within it.

The solo cello motif that responds to the Watchman's warning cries at the start of the Epilogue has no precedent in *Der Weg der Verheissung*, yet it sounds strangely familiar, as if it were some half-forgotten memory. Not until the mass jubilations of Psalm 47 are quietly reconsidered – first by the clarinets and then by a solitary oboe – is new light thrown on the secrets of the cello motif and its darkly apprehensive harmony. Finally, the motif is taken up by the violins, and transformed harmonically as well as in its outline. By now it is clear why the Epilogue is, for all its brevity, no mere miniature: many years and a long way after Schoenberg and Richard Dehmé, words and music have together described quite another kind of 'transfigured night'.

Like Weill, Schoenberg had abandoned the Jewish faith early in his adult life, and only much later was reminded of his origins by a personal experience of anti-Semitism. But whereas Schoenberg formally returned to the Jewish faith at a ceremony in Paris in 1933 – at about the time when

he tried to interest Reinhardt (and subsequently Werfel) in his own three-act prose drama on Zionist themes *Der biblische Weg* (The Bible Way) – Weill did not revert at any time. He did, however, dedicate to his gentle and pious father the little album of excerpts from *The Eternal Road* which was published in 1937. But the deepest and highest expression of that dedication is to be heard in these closing pages of *Propheten*. As the Thirteen-Year-Old invites his father, the Estranged One, to join him beside the Rabbi, Rachel's supplication on behalf of her 'children' and the pledge that Naomi received from the 'foreigner' Ruth are answered and fulfilled in terms whose symbolism is comprehensible on the simplest human levels, with or without the mediation of religion. In the reconciliations, the quiet dignity, and the firm resolve of the Epilogue may be discerned the kind of moral example which the victims of every human catastrophe may somehow pass on to the survivors, and hence to future generations.

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#### Previously at the Proms

The first work by Kurt Weill to be played at the Proms was his Second Symphony, 30 years ago, in its first public performance in the UK; the BBC Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Gary Bertini. Ten more works have featured since then, among them *The Seven Deadly Sins* and the *Mahagonny-Songspiel*, each with four performances. Among the other major works to have been heard recently are *Cry, the Beloved Country* in 1993 and *The Silver Lake* in 1996.

David Harman

## SYNOPSIS

This synopsis divides the through-composed form into its salient phases, which are titled according to their general character. In tonight's performance, the work is prefaced by Weill's 1947 orchestration of the 'Hatikvah', whose words and melody were later adopted as the Israeli national anthem.

### Prologue: In the House of Prayer

In a land that could be any land, at a time that could be any time in the history of racial persecution, a threatened Jewish community seeks refuge, and the faithful (but not only they) are gathered in their House of Prayer. Their Rabbi is preparing to recite from the Torah-scroll. Standing beside him is the Thirteen-Year-Old. On the steps below sits his father, the Estranged One – already contemplating the difficult road leading back to his abandoned faith.

As the Rabbi opens the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, the Boy shudders. He asks about the longed-for Messiah, and imagines he hears his voice. But the Rabbi tells him that it is the voice of the Prophet Isaiah.

### 1. Prophecies

'What of the night?' asks Isaiah of the invisible Watchman. He is answered by the Prophet Jeremiah, who foresees death and destruction. Isaiah responds with his message of comfort and his promise of that day when all nations shall 'beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks'.

## 2. Vanities

A busy street in Jerusalem during the first year of King Zedekiah's rule. The Adversary – representing the eternal sceptic and satanic mocker, and hence the only figure common to the scriptural and temporal levels – is selling idols from a cave beside the street. Echoing his tone, some nearby children make fun of Jeremiah as they observe him approaching from the distance, dressed in rags, with a yoke about his neck. Their taunts are enthusiastically taken up by the crowds of well-dressed passers-by. Jeremiah denounces worldly vanities. But the false prophet Hananiah flatters the crowds, and calls them to the Temple.

## 3. Conflict and Siege

In the Temple, Hananiah announces that because God has revealed to him that Babylon is to be overthrown, Zion must arm for war. True prophets, replies Jeremiah, are prophets of peace: unless the people repent and cast aside their vain leaders, it will be Jerusalem, not Babylon, that falls, and the Temple will be burned by the Almighty himself.

Jeremiah is denounced by Hananiah as a blasphemer, and his life is threatened by the crowd. Zedekiah, persuaded by the false prophet, repudiates the authority of Babylon and its king, Nebuchadnezzar.

In the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, Nebuchadnezzar's army begins to lay siege to Jerusalem. Discovered close by the city walls, Jeremiah is arrested as a traitor and flung into a dungeon, while the people again howl for his blood.

After a counter-attack, Zedekiah and his

entourage return to the palace to refresh themselves. But the larders are empty. From the dungeon below, Jeremiah's voice is heard, prophesying worse to come. Zedekiah orders him to be brought up, and the two confront each other.

## 4. The Choice

In a symbolic prologue to the crucial scene that follows, the Dark Angel and the First White Angel represent aspects of divine authority, while the Second White Angel postulates free will and human responsibility.

Jeremiah now tells Zedekiah that because of his disregard for the Holy Word and expressly because of his defiance over Babylon, all will be lost unless he atone to the Almighty by humbling himself before Nebuchadnezzar and pleading clemency.

Unable to decide between the counsels of Jeremiah and those of Hananiah, yet refusing to humble himself, Zedekiah prevaricates, and tries to shift to the Almighty the consequences of his own obduracy. In accordance with the prophecies and with the Dark Angel's express commission, Jerusalem is duly overwhelmed and laid to waste, its King blinded, its people enslaved, and its Temple burned to the ground.

As if summoned by the cries of the community in the House of Prayer, there ensues a brief apparition of Rachel, weeping for her children.

## 5. The Answer

During the long night in the House of Prayer, only the Thirteen-Year-Old remains awake. Just before dawn, the Angel of the End of Time appears to him in a



redemptive vision. At first light, the boy awakens the sleeping community with the news that he now has the answer to his question concerning the Messiah, and hence to their prayers. At this very moment, a Messenger arrives bearing the King's decree: on pain of death, the communities of Israel are to leave the occupied area of the city by nightfall.

## 6. The Builders (Habonim)

Interlude: the orchestral narrative harks back to the building of Solomon's Temple in Act 3 of *Der Weg der Verheissung*, while at the same time evoking the spirit of the work-song 'Havu L'venim' ('Bring the bricks'), which the composer was to arrange in 1937 for Hans Nathan's collection *Folksongs of the New Palestine*.

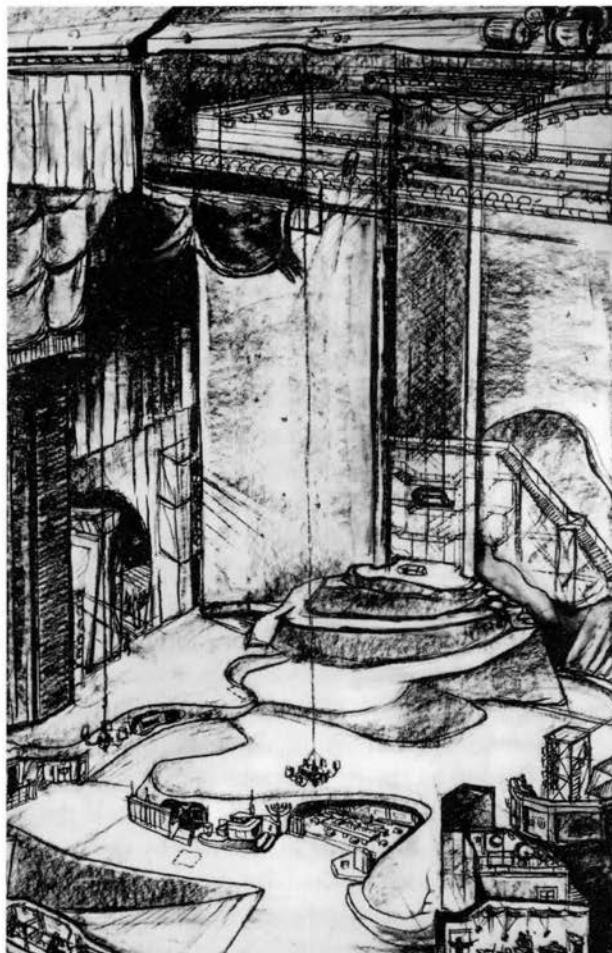
## 7. A Vision of Temples

A culminating vision at last unites the scriptural levels with the entire community in the House of Prayer. The dedication of Solomon's Temple is recalled by his disembodied voice, and echoed first by the Rabbi and then, in the words of Psalm 47, by the Double Chorus, of which one half represents the temporal community. As if to reaffirm Isaiah's opening prophecy, the psalms of praise and the culminating alleluias proclaim an Israel honoured and emulated by all peace-loving and God-fearing nations.

Suddenly, the entire vision is extinguished by a thunderous knock on the door of the House of Prayer.

## Epilogue: In the House of Prayer

The Watchman gives warning of immediate danger and urges all to hide. While the community vanishes



into the darkness, their Rabbi remains at his place by the Torah-scroll. Beside him, resolute, stands the Thirteen-Year-Old, and below – still seated on the steps – is his father, the Estranged One. Softly, the boy calls to his father. The Estranged One rises, and joins his son and the Rabbi by the Torah-scroll.

Above  
SKETCH BY NORMAN  
BEL GEDDES OF HIS  
STAGE DESIGN FOR  
THE 1937 PREMIERE  
OF *THE ETERNAL  
ROAD*