

Copyright by the Estate of
David Drew.

for Baden-Baden was closely if not at that time organically connected with his and Brecht's operatic plan.

The *Mahagonny-Songspiel* (sometimes called *Das kleine Mahagonny* to distinguish it from the opera, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*) was composed in Berlin in May 1927, and first performed at the Baden-Baden festival in July. Despite its success on that occasion, Weill decided to keep it in reserve until the opera was finished and — as he hoped — established in the repertoire. In fact, the authentic 'Songspiel' was not revived until 1960 — ten years after the composer's death. However, a bastard-version was performed several times in Paris, London, and Rome during the 1930s. The much-applauded burlesque presented by the Berliner Ensemble in the 1960s under the title *Das kleine Mahagonny* is considerably further removed from the authentic score — it is indeed a potted theatre-version of the opera libretto, with incidental music very freely derived from both the opera and the 'Songspiel'. The present performance is based strictly on the composer's manuscript.

The *Mahagonny-Songspiel* is a kind of scenic cantata for six voices and ten instruments (two clarinets and trumpets, saxophone, trombone, two violins, piano and percussion). 'Mahagonny' is an invented place-name. It does not mean 'mahogany' (for which the German word is 'Mahagoni') though the resemblance is intentional and suggestive of old-fashioned middle-class comfort. The other resemblance is with the Sanscrit word 'Mahanagar' meaning large city or colony. No definite locale is

Mahagonny-Songspiel (1927) / Kurt Weill (1900-1950)

(First performance in this country)

Early in 1927 Weill was invited to write a one-act chamber opera for that year's Baden-Baden festival of new music. Hindemith, who was on the festival committee, was to write his *Hin und Zurück* for the same programme, and the other contributors were to be Milhaud and Ernst Toch. Weill was hesitant, as he had already written three one-act operas, and was preparing to write a full-length one with Brecht. His first idea was to compose a *scena* based on a passage from *King Lear*. Time was short, and a ready-made text desirable. The one he eventually composed

intended. Like the actual place names which occur in the text – Alabama, Benares – the word ‘Mahagonny’ has more of a phonetic than a local significance.

‘Songspiel’ is likewise an invented word. It is a conflation of ‘*Singspiel*’ and ‘*Song*’, the word used by Weill and Brecht to denote a certain type of strophic song in popular style. The text – except for the last two verses – was taken from the fourth ‘lesson’ in Brecht’s 1926 verse-collection, the *Hauspostille* (‘Household Breviary’). In the foreword to the *Hauspostille* Brecht writes that the ‘*Mahagonny-gesänge*’ are intended ‘for the hours of opulence, of fleshly consciousness, and of arrogance’, and adds that they therefore concern only a very few readers.

The appendix to the *Hauspostille* contains Brecht’s unharmonised tunes, or chants, for the five ‘*Mahagonnygesänge*’. Weill used none of them. But in the case of the ‘Alabama Song’ and ‘*Gott in Mahagonny*’ he developed his own musical ideas from the gesture or pattern outlined by Brecht.

For the ‘Songspiel’ version of the *Hauspostille* text, Brecht added a short epilogue. The order of the original ‘*Mahagonnygesänge*’ was changed, and for purely musical reasons the verse-lines were variously apportioned between the six singers. Although the singers are given individual names, they do not represent individual characters (and according to the stage directions are to be dressed anonymously). Their function, as in Stravinsky’s *Renard* or *Les Noces*, is choric: so much so that in one case – the ‘Alabama Song’ – the sopranos are given a ‘male’ text. (The phrase, ‘Show me the way to the next pretty girl’, does not, as one recent producer concluded,

indicate what used to be called an unnatural vice.)

Since there is no dramatic characterisation or narrative thread – only a sequence of tableaux – the music is the principal formative element: in its tonal, its temporal, and not least in its motival development. The six vocal numbers are linked by instrumental ones. While the vocal numbers tend (though not invariably) to evoke jazz and popular idioms, and are tonally defined (*via* the home key of D minor), the instrumental ones tend in opposite directions and are tonally disruptive. But this polarity is reversed after the shattering climax at the end of the penultimate number. While the main vocal section in the finale is implicitly a repudiation of jazz – which, as Satie once said, ‘shouts its sorrows at us, and we don’t give a damn’ – the mainly instrumental coda brings it back; but only as if to prove that it was, after all, a hallucination.

Author's Copyright