

Weill and The Silver Lake

In February 1933 Weill had the three premieres of *Der Silbersee* to think about, and a lot more besides - including his future in Germany, and the future of most of his projects apart from a symphony. But although Hitler had recently been installed as Chancellor, the press and the public at each of the premieres were still 'free' to applaud an allegedly un-German composer and a notoriously anti-Prussian playwright; and applaud them they duly did, with the same enthusiasm as the many visitors from Berlin (only the official press of the far Right and far Left dissented).

But it wasn't just the circumstances of the time that stopped Weill himself from writing another of his introductory or retrospective articles. From his point of view at that time - and perhaps also from ours today - it was important that this particular music, and this particular play, should be allowed to speak for themselves, as directly as possible.

Yet the fact remains that in 1999 no less than in 1933 the name of Weill is unlikely to mean much to theatre-goers unless it means *The Threepenny Opera* to begin with. It's not a bad beginning, even for the discovery of *The Silver Lake*.

On the face of it, the piece belongs to the same genre: a 'play-with-music', in which the proportions between dialogue and music are similar; and a networked structure of songs and duets (no ensembles!) that likewise culminates in an extended finale with chorus.

But instead of a glorified jazz band, there is an orchestra large enough for the ducal theatres of 19th-century Germany, and modest enough to evoke the world of the genuinely destitute rather than that of the *Threepenny Opera's* stage army of fake beggars. And instead of streetwise rascals and small-time crooks singing in ragged unison, there is an off-stage chorus whose commentaries recall the tradition of *The Magic Flute*. Without any real parallel in *The Threepenny Opera* - and this again goes back to Mozart and the 18th century - are the extensive and important passages where spoken monologues or dialogues are either accompanied by music, or punctuated by it. Thus the music itself becomes part of the spoken exchanges.

In the casting requirements too, *The Silver Lake* belongs to a different genre. The role of Severin, for instance, involves musical and dramatic challenges that Weill and Brecht's Macheath - or John Gay's for that matter - would have had nightmares about. As the outraged voice of the dispossessed, Severin has a full-blooded revenge-aria that Verdi himself might have been proud of; and later he joins Fennimore in a duet whose long lyrical line and searching harmony leave Polly, Macheath, and their famous Soho-moon looking distinctly puzzled at the evidence that there is nothing 'between' this pair but trust and simple human fellowship.

The music of *The Silver Lake* is deceptive only in its rare but essential examinations of the deceitful. One has to listen closely to what the Lottery Agent is recommending in order to realise why the music is recommending something better. In the grocery-store scene, on the other hand, the waltz-music for the two sales-assistants is wholly in sympathy with the feelings they are trying to express, but finds its own way of expressing them, and draws conclusions that they themselves are not yet aware of.

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