

The Threepenny Opera

At the end of February 1928 Weill finished the first act of his opera *The Rise and Fall of Mahagonny City*. He then took a break to fulfil two minor commissions and discuss a new project with Brecht and his assistant Elisabeth Hauptmann (the joint authors, with Weill, of the *Mahagonny* libretto). The project was a free adaptation of *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay, with new song-texts and, therefore, new music. Gay's ballad opera was to have its two-hundredth anniversary in 1928, but was almost unknown in Germany except to scholars and international theatre-goers. The famous Playfair-Austin version for the Lyric, Hammersmith, had been running in London since 1920 and was now approaching its 1,500th performance.

The project was accepted by Ernst Josef Aufricht, a young Berlin producer who had recently acquired the disused and out-of-the-way Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, and was planning to re-open it in August as a centre for progressive if not experimental drama. Weill composed most of the music in Berlin during the month of June, while Brecht was at his summer house on the Ammersee near Munich. At that stage the working title was still "*Die Bettler-Oper*" but shortly before the première this was changed to *Die Dreigroschenoper*: — *The Threepenny Opera* as it is now universally known in the English-speaking world.

The triumphantly successful première of *The Threepenny Opera* at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm on 31 August 1928 is part of theatrical history, but also has its place in the history of music in our time. After the musical revolutions of the pre-war years, new music had increasingly become a specialised affair, with audiences and festivals of its own. To write music that was genuinely "new" and yet accessible to a non-specialist audience — such as an average, intelligent, theatre audience — was one of the two specific challenges which Weill found so stimulating while at work on *The Threepenny Opera*; and the other was how to reconcile novelty of substance, and especially harmonic substance, with the technical limitations of non-professional singers. That was a challenge which began at home, for his wife Lotte Lenya was to play and sing the role of Jenny. But not every actress is a Lenya, nor every actor an Ernst Busch: there are passages in *The Threepenny Opera* when Weill gets so carried away that he momentarily forgets he is writing for actors at all; and those passages are of course among the most important.

The relationship between *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Beggar's Opera* has led to certain misunderstandings, not least in England, where *The Threepenny Opera* was much frowned upon during the 1930's (though not by some of the younger musicians and composers, for whom it assumed an almost symbolic significance: one can still hear an echo of it in Tippett's *Child of Our Time*). It is, for instance, wrong to suppose that Brecht's play contains anything comparable to Gay's attacks on the Walpole administration and the Court; it is not, in that sense, a topical play at all, nor indeed is it a political one in the Marxist sense with which Brecht fully identified himself only after he and Weill had parted company. It is equally mistaken to suppose that the score was intended as an opera parody — whether of the Handel revival of the 1920's or of any modern equivalent to the Italian opera fashionable in London in Gay's and Pepusch's time (there was no such equivalent in the Berlin of Weill and Brecht), or even of opera in general (whose future was one of Weill's deepest creative concerns). Whatever the tone of the score may suggest to the contrary — and it is often but not always a harsh tone — the elements of parody and irony tell us less about Weill's respect for Offenbach than about his love of Mozart; and *The Threepenny Opera* was, he felt, his first step towards a form of modern Singspiel which he would seek to develop as a parallel to his through-composed works for the operatic stage.