

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

Kurt Weill

1900-1950

*Text by Bertolt Brecht, English translation*

*by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman*

*(First concert performance of original soprano version; first performance at a Henry Wood Promenade Concert.)*

*Prologue (andante sostenuto)*

1. *Sloth (allegro vivace)*

2. *Pride (allegretto, quasi andantino—Schneller Walzer)*

3. *Anger (molto agitato)*

4. *Gluttony (largo)*

5. *Lust (moderato)*

6. *Avarice (allegro giusto)*

7. *Envy (allegro non troppo—alla marcia)*

*Epilogue (andante sostenuto)*

EVELYN LEAR

RONALD DOWD

EDWARD BYLES

JAMES CHRISTIANSEN

FRANK OLEGARIO

Anna

} The Family

*Prologue* (Anna). Anna and her 'sister' set out on a seven years' journey, which will take them to seven cities. Their family in Louisiana expect them to provide, from their earnings, the money to build a 'little house' by the Mississippi. Anna explains that she and her 'sister' are not really two people, but simply two sides of one personality.

*Sloth* (Family). The family complain about their daughter's laziness. Apparently she has no urge to get on in the world.

*Pride* (Anna, Family). Anna is engaged as dancer in a cabaret. Anna's better self is proud and artistic; but as the cabaret-goers aren't interested in art, Anna's 'realistic' self persuades her to show her body rather than her sensibility. So begins her humiliation.

*Anger* (Anna, Family). In Los Angeles, the 'good' Anna is angered by scenes of injustice; her other self orders her to suppress her anger.

*Gluttony* (Family). Anna enjoys eating, but her contract—the family remind her—stipulates a strict diet.

*Lust* (Anna, Family). Anna, now in Boston, has a wealthy keeper; but she spends her money on a (presumably penniless) lover. This, her practical self explains, is unwise and commercially unethical; so she renounces her lover.

*Avarice* (Family). The family is delighted that Anna's name is now in the newspapers—people are shooting themselves for her. But is she, perhaps, going too far? She must not grab *all* she can get.

*Envy* (Anna, Family). Anna envies those who are able to be *lazy*, who are too *proud* to be bought, who are free to express their *anger* at injustice; and so on. But her practical self reminds her of the price they must pay, and of the rewards of self-sacrifice.

*Epilogue* (Anna). Anna returns to Louisiana, and to the little house that, thanks to her, has been built there.

WEILL composed *The Seven Deadly Sins* in Paris in April–May 1933, shortly after leaving his native Germany (to which he was never to return). It is contemporary with, and in a sense complementary to, his second symphony. The world première took place in June 1933 at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées, and was a stage production with choreography by Georges Balanchine. The only other production during Weill's and Brecht's lifetime—at the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen, in 1936—incurred the displeasure of the German Ambassador in Denmark, and on that account was immediately withdrawn. The work's international fame dates from its first revival in the late 1950s.

As listeners, we hardly need to know that *The Seven Deadly Sins* was the result of a ballet commission; and without knowing it, we certainly would never guess. The music is far removed from the Franco-Russian ballet-music tradition, and neither Weill nor Brecht seems to have felt any particular obligation to choreographers or dancers. Words and music form a self-sufficient unity which is so finely composed that even when the orchestra takes over from the voices and provides what might be regarded as a cue for dancing—as in the *saltarello* episode (in 'Sloth') and the quick waltz (in 'Pride')—there is no need for visual elaboration. What we hear is enough for the mind's eye: a highly original synthesis of cantata and orchestral song cycle.

Like its form, the substance and style of the work are unconventional. Constant Lambert, who was one of the few critics to take the work seriously in the 1930s, discussed it—together with works by Weill's friend Darius Milhaud—under the heading 'Symphonic Jazz'. But of jazz, even in the loosest sense of the word (let alone in Milhaud's American-negro or even

Latin-American sense) there is no trace whatsoever in most of the numbers. Where there are traces—notably in the ‘blues’ feeling of the Prologue and the Chaplinesque tragi-comedy of the orchestral episode in ‘Anger’—the background and middleground are unmistakably European. Brecht’s text is, of course, studded with American place-names; but these are part of his distancing mythology and sometimes sound like incantations. Although the Auden-Kallman translation (which was made for a New York stage production) increases and develops the American allusions, we are still left with the musical image of an itinerary somewhere East of the Rhine. Brecht, too, was little concerned with ‘American’ authenticity; so little, indeed, that he first gave the name ‘Adolf’ to Anna’s Bostonian lover, and then changed it to ‘Fernando’—not, one notes, to ‘Benito’, for there are no politics of that sort in the piece.

The form of the work is symmetrical. Between the prologue and the epilogue stand 3+1+3 ‘Sins’, the centre-piece being a male quartet (‘Gluttony’) which has only a solo guitar for accompaniment. The other numbers are scored for a normal medium-sized orchestra with the addition of harp, piano, and banjo (but no saxophones).

Weill’s original score, which we are hearing tonight, has not been performed since 1936. In the late 1950s a special edition was made for purely practical purposes; it has remained in use ever since. Apart from some small but not insignificant changes, it involved the downward transposition of all the music for the solo soprano. Consequently the tonal structure of the whole work and the colour of large sections of it were much altered. The ‘home’ key of Weill’s original score—and home, after all, is the text’s recurrent image—is C. Firmly established in the number following the exploratory Prologue, C minor becomes C major at the start of ‘Pride’. C major is reaffirmed in the centre-piece, ‘Gluttony’; and in C the work, and the tragedy, ends.

Tragedy? Brecht’s subtly allusive text gives few hints of it; and the Auden-Kallman translation skirts even them—including the phrase which begins the final march and in literal translation runs: ‘Sister, we are all born free and, as we please, we may walk in the light.’ But Weill’s art—his lyricism, his irony, even his humour (of which there are some splendid examples here)—is fundamentally tragic; and what it conveys in these ‘songs of a wayfaring traveller’, this modern *Winterreise*, is the stage-by-stage sacrifice of an individual (Anna) on the altar of a falsely orientated society (The Family). In learning to subject her own moral and instinctive self to the demands of that society, the Anna who was ‘born free’ ends in total enslavement. No wonder the ‘triumphal’ sounds of the final march also convey a sense of outrage; no wonder the ‘perfect peace’ of the epilogue’s C major conclusion contains within itself an insufferable discordancy.

D.D.