

Symphony No. 1, in one movement

Kurt Weill
1900-1950

Kurt Weill's score for Berthold Brecht's *Die Dreigroschenoper*, 'The Three-penny Opera' (1928) was to bring the composer world wide fame, and in later times, some of its songs, notably 'Mack the Knife' were to achieve 'pop' prestige. This mordantly sardonic work had been preceded by the *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, the 'Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny', and was followed by *Der Jasager*, 'The Yea-sayer'. For Weill, as a Jew and a Communist and with his music officially branded as decadent, the rise of the Nazis meant exile from Germany, first to France and England and then, permanently in the United States. There he became associated with the Broadway musical, including such works as *Street Scene*, and *Lost in the Stars*, and his folk-opera, based on Kentucky tunes, *Down in the Valley* achieved a wide circulation.

He wrote however in other media, and among his orchestral works are the symphonies of 1921 and of 1933 and the *Sinfonia Sacra* of 1922. At this point, readers are reminded that although as a young man he had amused himself with penning cabaret songs, he did not introduce popular elements into his published scores until the mid-1920s. The 1st Symphony does not therefore sound like the *Threepenny Opera* or *The Seven Deadly Sins*. With a duration of about twenty-five minutes and scored for two flutes, oboe, two clarinets, two bassoons, horns, single trumpet and trombone, timpani, percussion and strings, it falls into four main sections. These are the *Grave* Introduction, followed by an extensive *Allegro vivace*, followed in turn by an *Andante religioso* and finally by a *Larghetto*.

David Drew has contributed the following note:

'The autograph score bears the date 'April-June' 1921. This suggests that the symphony whose completion Weill announced to his parents on 10 December 1920 was either unrelated to the present one, or else so remotely related that he did not need to acknowledge it in his 1921 dating. 'The Symphony No. O' has disappeared without trace. Its successor is the first major product of the three years Weill spent as a member of Busoni's Masterclass in Composition at the Prussian Academy of Arts. The work was not written under Busoni's close supervision. Although at least one previous orchestral work of Weill's—the symphonic poem after Rilke's

'Cornet'—had been performed in public before Weill entered the Master-class, he never released the symphony for public performance. However he did not underrate its importance; as late as 1932 he included it among the representative works of his early years. The score was lost in 1933 but came to light 25 years later. The first performance, from the unedited material, was given in 1957 by the NDR Symphony Orchestra under Wilhelm Schüchter.

The score's title page—removed by well-wishers who hid the score during the second world war—bore an epigraph taken from Johannes R. Becher's Festspiel *Arbeiter, Bauern, Soldaten—Der Aufbruch eines Volkes zu Gott*. (Workers, Peasants, Soldiers—A People's Awakening to God. Insel Verlag, Leipzig, 1921.) Written in an extreme expressionist idiom derived from Strindberg's religious dramas, the play gives a stylised picture of a world in the throes of war and revolution. It ends with a representation of mankind singing God's praises and advancing towards the promised land of peace and social justice. (Three years later Becher completely re-wrote the text; the religious message was excluded and the social one re-interpreted on orthodox communist lines rather than on the romantic left wing sentiments of the original version.) Although a similar note of jubilation is sounded towards the end of Weill's symphony, the work is not programmatic—except in the very general sense that it is a 'war symphony', and that the central *Andante religioso* may reflect a search for the experience revealed in the later chorale developments of the final section.

Like Schönberg's Chamber Symphony, Op. 9, to which it is clearly indebted, the symphony is in one continuous movement, and is founded both melodically and harmonically, on the interval of the fourth. In its thematic and motival aspects, it shows the influence of Liszt and Richard Strauss; in its expression, that of Mahler.'