

# Kurt Weill

## From Time to Time

### Berlin Lit Up (Berlin Im Licht)

In association with the Berlin Festival of September 1928, the city's lighting and power concerns mounted a vast display of illuminations under the slogan 'Berlin im Licht'. By advertising so proudly the most modern technological resources, they were in effect advertising modernity itself, and asserting Berlin's economic and cultural vitality a decade after the defeats and humiliations of 1918.

A claim to parity with Paris, London, and New York was thus implicit in the entire venture. True, the Wall Street Crash was to follow exactly a year later. But in the meantime Berlin 'lit up' could justifiably display itself as a much more prosperous, sophisticated, and influential capital than its former Austro-Hungarian rival (not to mention the new Rome of Mussolini).

For Weill to write the theme-song for such a civic event was a natural consequence of the triumphant success of *The Threepenny*

*Opera*, which had opened at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm at the end of August. The text of the song, which appears to have been the joint work of Weill and Brecht, has no artistic pretensions. Nevertheless, its colloquialisms contain enough double meanings to ensure its survival in all manner of unforeseen circumstances – not least in 1989, when the Berlin Wall was breached and the crowds stormed into the Stasi Headquarters. Exactly sixty years before that, and only a few weeks before many of Berlin's lights were extinguished by the Wall Street Crash, Weill borrowed the first eight bars of the 'Berlin im Licht' refrain for the very different purposes of *Happy End* and its notoriously angry finale. There, the music originally associated with the words 'Und zum Spaziergehn, genügt das Sonnenlicht' becomes the means of proclaiming the derisive message, 'Hosianna Rockefeller, Hosianna Henry Ford!'.

Duration c. 4 minutes

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### Concerto for violin and wind instruments

*Andante con moto*  
*Notturmo – Cadenza – Serenata*  
*Allegro molto, un poco agitato*

The Concerto was written in Berlin in April/May 1924, immediately after Weill's return from an extended foreign holiday that took him to the mountains of Switzerland, and then on to his first exploration of Italy – an overwhelming experience, as his letters to Busoni and to his family testify. From Rome he returned to Berlin via Vienna.

Intended for, but never played by, Joseph Szigeti, the Concerto had its first performance at a contemporary music concert in Paris on 11 June 1925 (soloist Marcel Darrieux, conductor Walter Straram). During the following years it became the most widely performed of Weill's instrumental works. It retains that position today, and has also been frequently recorded.

Yet it is not a piece that goes out of its way to be endearing. There is no relief from the harsh and wintry landscape of the first movement until towards the end, when the violin removes itself from a storm-swept scene and initiates, *dolce espressivo*, a passage of rapt and songful contemplation. The movement ends with no more than a brief reminder of the bleakness with which it began.

The second movement is a sequence of three night-scenes – a spooky and quasi-jazzy one to begin with, a military one in the central Cadenza, and finally, a Serenata that dreams of Italianate warmth without attaining it. It is only at the start of the Finale that there is a strong sense of arriving in the beloved Italy of Weill's teacher, Ferruccio Busoni. But the tarantella character does not remain festive for long, and as it becomes increasingly agitated, the lyrical episodes acquire a fugitive air which is explained by the swaggering vulgarity of the march-theme that interrupts the dance, and appears to represent something from which the putative rondo form has to recoil. Suddenly, the pace slackens, and the tarantella rhythm is eliminated.

What follows is the most inward and yet

the most eloquent passage in the entire work. Seemingly analogous to the first movement's closing idyll, it turns out, however, to be a moment of respite before the mob returns. The sense of hunters and hunted that was suggested earlier on is now conveyed by a final *allegro* that culminates in a rhythmically as well as harmonically distorted development of the swaggering *ritornello*. It is as if the troops whose distant *reveilles* were heard in the central Cadenza movement are now being dispatched on some vainglorious foreign expedition. In the midst of this absurd escapade, the orchestra eerily anticipates a motif that will later be taken up by the Salvation Army chorus in *Happy End*: 'Geht hinein in die Schlacht!' – 'Forward, into battle!'. Here, the soloist responds with scornful fanfares.

Remembering that with Weill's music (as with Shostakovich's), literal interpretations of apparent contemporary parallels can be misleading, listeners may judge for themselves whether the fact that Mussolini and his Fascists won a massive and unexpected electoral victory on 7 April 1924 has any bearing on the character of the Concerto's finale.

Duration c. 32 minutes

### Panamanian Suite (Suite Panaméenne)

*Introduction and Tango –*  
*March of the Panamanian Army –*  
*Tango-Habanera –*  
*Tempo di Foxtrot*

Jacques Deval's stage adaptation of his best-selling novel *Marie galante* was produced in Paris in December 1934, and swiftly forgotten. Some of the songs Weill composed for it became popular and have remained so. But nearly half a century was to pass before the (almost) complete score, including the instrumental pieces, was heard again; and it wasn't until ten years ago that the present Suite of instrumental numbers became possible as a result of two discoveries – a long lost orchestral score of the *Tango-Habanera* (better known as the song 'Youkali'), and an altogether different *Tango*, of whose very existence there had

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been no previous indication. A piano reduction of the *Tango*, together with one of three surviving instrumental parts, are in Weill's hand, and have been scrupulously followed in the full-score version prepared by HK Gruber for the recording of the Suite which he conducted in 1990.

Since none of the instrumental pieces owes anything specific to its immediate dramatic context, it is perhaps sufficient to remark that the action of *Marie galante* is mainly set in Panama; that the atmosphere is one of corruption and ever-present danger; and that Deval's portrayals of European and Central American decadence are interwoven with elements of spy thriller and travel story in a manner akin to that of Graham Greene's lighter novels.

So it is no surprise that Weill provides the Panamanian army with a march that suggests its bands have been schooled in the repertory of Austro-Hungarian and Prussian operetta. While the point of the central *Tango-Habanera* is precisely that the piece could turn up anywhere at any time – it even turned up a few years ago in Almodóvar's film *Kika* – the introductory *Tango* reeks of the music Weill was writing during the last months before his flight from Germany. It finally meets its match in the wild Foxtrot that ends the Suite and brilliantly converts 'The Song of the Hard Nut' from *Happy End* (1929) into something ideally suited to the shady dance-hall customers in Deval's play.

Duration c. 11 minutes

### Concerning the Death in the Forest (Vom Tod im Wald)

Brecht wrote his great poem 'Vom Tod im Wald' in 1918 and included it in *Baal*, his first major play. Weill's setting of 1927 uses the slightly revised version Brecht published in the *Hauspostille* (1927). Although the work was written shortly after the *Mahagonny Songspiel*, it has almost nothing in common with that score, and is much closer to the style of the *Violin Concerto* and *The Protagonist*.

*Vom Tod im Wald* was first performed at a Berlin Philharmonic concert in November 1927, and condemned by one reviewer as a 'monstrosity'. After seven decades in which the world has witnessed monstrosities of quite another order, the solitary shaft of light that illuminates the close of Weill's setting seems just as telling as the unfathomable darkness of the final bars, and equally relevant to the scene.

Duration c. 9 minutes

*Song texts for Concerning the Death in the Forest (Vom Tod im Wald) follow overleaf ...*

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### Oil Music (Öl-Musik)

Arranged by David Drew

Nocturne

Work-Rhythms

Work Song

Ballad: 'The Mussel from Margate'

In March 1928 Weill interrupted work on his opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* to write two theatre scores. One of them was for *Konjunktur* (Business Cycle), a 'comedy of economics' produced by Erwin Piscator at the Lessing Theater the following month. The author of the original play was Leo Lania, a writer and journalist who had distinguished himself with his reports of the Hitler trial in 1924, and was now a member of Piscator's 'collective' of writers. The stage version of *Konjunktur* was the joint work of Lania, Piscator and his Dramaturg, Felix Gasbarra.

In his original programme note, Lania remarks that the 'hero' of the play is petrol, and that the 'plot' concerns the economic and political implications of the

struggle for oil. The play opens in a primitive Balkan country where oil is accidentally discovered by three smalltime hoodlums. They are soon followed by increasingly weighty representatives of American, Anglo-Dutch and Soviet oil interests, and there ensues, as a contemporary critic wrote, 'the struggle of the strong and the exploitation of the weak, manslaughter and murder, grandiose fraud and primitive trickery, all for the sake of oil'.

The surviving sections of Weill's score include the Nocturne – which was to reappear in his Broadway opera *Street Scene* (1946) – and various ostinato patterns or 'work rhythms' designed for documentary film sequences. While there are no extant words for the Work Song (headed '*Arbeiterlied*' in Weill's manuscript), Gasbarra's lyrics for the Margate ballad are ample compensation – fact, fiction, and (accurate) prophecy rolled into one.

Duration c. 8 minutes

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### Little Threepenny Music (Kleine Dreigroschenmusik)

1. Overture
2. The Moritat of Mack the Knife
3. The Instead-of Song
4. The Ballad of the Easy Life
5. Polly's Song
6. Tango-Ballad
7. Cannon Song
8. Threepenny Finale

The 'Little Threepenny Music' is no mere selection from the famous *Threepenny Opera*, but a composition in its own right, with a form and character that distinguish it from the original score. Written at the invitation of Otto Klemperer and intended for one of his modern-music concerts at the 'Kroll' Opera in Berlin, it had its first hearing, under Klemperer's direction, at the 1929 Opera Ball – one of the social events of the Berlin season. To perform such a piece on such an occasion was seen by some of the guests as deliberately provocative – which perhaps it was, though no more so than performing it at a concert of modern music.

The title's hint of Mozart and his *Kleine Nachtmusik* is not entirely playful. In Mozart's day, every successful new opera or *Singspiel* would be raided by pirates. Wind band arrangements in the form of serenades and divertimentos were especially lucrative – so much so that Mozart wrote to his father after the premiere of *Die Entführung* saying that in order to forestall prospective 'thieves' he was making a wind band suite of his own.

Thanks to the laws of copyright, Weill had no such worries. Nor was he trying to cash in on his success. On the contrary, he could hardly have made an arrangement less suited to the concert conditions of the day. In today's very different conditions, the *Little Threepenny Music* is a repertory piece in all corners of the world. Even so, it has achieved its popularity without courting it. For example, the 'Instead-of Song' (No.3) has a new obbligato melody on the soprano sax which picks up a thread from the Overture and prepares for the Finale (No.8). Quite different in structure from the closing scene of the

stage version, Weill's new Finale uses the darkest music in the entire score in order to contrast it with the false dawn of the concluding Chorale and confirm its relationship to the Overture.

At the centre of the arch formed by the Overture and the Finale is Polly's G major 'Lied', a song-without-words whose latent classicism is essential to the structure of the suite. After the jazzy jocularities of the second and third numbers – where Mack the Knife is unexpectedly confronted by Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum – the unaffected and almost Schubertian lyricism of *Polly's Song* serves as a moment of repose before the increasingly weighty numbers that follow – the Tango and its fatal sensuality, the militaristic and rabble-rousing Cannon Song (with its new Spanish colouring), and the Finale's 'Call from the Grave'.

Duration c. 22 minutes

All programme notes and articles

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