

The Threepenny Opera

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Many books, three film-versions, countless stage-productions, and ever-growing mountains of scholarly dissertations and popular journalism, testify to the enduring fascination of *Die Dreigroschenoper* and its multilingual progeny – *The Threepenny Opera*, *L'Opera da Tre Soldi*, *L'opéra de quat'sous*, and so forth. Sheer commercial success does of course play its part in that fascination, as it always will where theatre and above all the musical stage are concerned; for nowhere else – not in the board-room or the bedroom, the football stadium or the operating theatre – is the evidence and even the anatomy of success so clear, yet the science of it so inexact. As the great Alfred Kerr remarked à propos of *Die Dreigroschenoper*: "The theatre is not a load of theoretical nonsense. It is dynamic and full of variety, of life. It is laughter in all kinds of weather. It is the bustle of humanity."

It was in that very bustle that *Die Dreigroschenoper* began life. During the theatre season 1927-28 Brecht was a member of the writers' collective working with Erwin Piscator at his Theater am Nollendorfplatz in Berlin, and Weill was largely occupied with the composition of *Rise and Fall of Mahagonny City* (*Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*). For Brecht, the year had begun with the Berlin premiere on 5 January of his comedy *Mann ist Mann* (*A Man's a Man*). A revelation to Weill when he read and reviewed it nine months earlier, the play was not a popular success and was not specifically intended to be.

Financially speaking, however, these were still hard times for Brecht (as for Weill). When first approached, early in 1928, by the young producer Ernst Josef Aufricht – a former bit-part player and cabarettist, now converted to higher things by the magic of a generous cheque from his father – Brecht failed to interest him in his works-in-progress (which in any case were promised to Piscator). According to Aufricht's highly coloured account, Brecht then "remembered" a translation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* his friend Elisabeth Hauptmann was preparing for him. He also remembered Weill.

By now desperate to find a play with which to open his first season at the small

Schiffbauerdamm-Theatre, Aufricht left at the idea of an adaptation by Brecht of *The Beggar's Opera*, and probably didn't need his literary advisors to remind him that 1928 marked the 200th anniversary of John Gay's play, or that Nigel Playfair's revival of 1920 had broken all records – running non-stop for three years at the (Schiffbauerdamm-like) Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, and then repeatedly brought back by popular demand. The German rights in the Playfair-Austin version were held by Schott, and as Stephen Hinton's researches have revealed, Schott had written in 1925 to their star composer, Paul Hindemith, suggesting a modernized and indeed jazzy version of the score. Hindemith does not appear to have responded.

Knowing nothing of Weill – and why should he, at that time? – but impressed by Brecht's recommendation, Aufricht went to Leipzig to hear Weill's latest piece, the one-act opera *The Tsar has his Photograph Taken*, whose premiere was on 18 February 1928. By the time Aufricht's oft-repeated story reached his memoirs, some important details had been lost or transformed, but one key element remains constant: he found the opera's "modernist" idioms quite unsuitable for a *Beggar's Opera* (not to mention his own legitimate commercial purposes), and promptly asked his musical director Theo Mackeben – himself a composer of light music and cabaret songs – to prepare a substitute score based on Pepusch's original edition of 1728.

These alarms and excursions seem strikingly unnecessary. Even if Aufricht, for some obscure reason, was reluctant to talk with Weill and ask him to play something appropriate from the previous year's *Mahagonny Songspiel*, a short ride on the S-Bahn on the 5th of April would have brought his team to the Lessing Theatre and the opening night of Piscator's production of *Konjunktur* (*Trade Cycle*), a documentary of oil-politics for which Weill had composed a score containing "The Mussel of Margate", a hit-song as rumbustious as any that a modern *Beggar's Opera* might call for (it will be featured, incidentally, in

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the Weill-centenary concert at the QEH on 2 March 2000). What's more, one of the leading roles in *Konjunktur* was played by Roma Bahn, eventually to become Brecht's and Weill's first Polly in *Die Dreigroschenoper*.

Aufricht does not mention *Konjunktur* (and neither do the commentators who rightly pick holes in his tale). Whatever the true and exact sequence of events, it is clear that any doubts about Weill's musical qualifications had been dispelled long before the historic premiere at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm on 31 August 1928 – when the Peachums were played by Erich Ponto (familiar to today's fans of Carol Reed's postwar film *The Third Man*) and Rosa Valetti, Macheath by the operetta tenor Harald Paulsen, and Jenny by Lotte Lenya. The well-known Lewis Ruth Band was conducted by Theo Mackeben.

But for the last-minute interpolation of the "Die Moritat von Mackie Messer" (The Ballad of Mack the Knife), the audience on that first night would have found that the harshly neo-classical and somewhat Stravinskian overture was followed by an almost purely "classical" version of Peachum's opening song from *The Beggar's Opera*. Weill's reasons for retaining this song and no other still remain a matter for speculation, aided, one hopes, by ethno-musicological research (a liturgical origin, perhaps Spanish or Sephardic, would not be surprising); but in any event the song clearly relates to his conception of the third finale, and in particular to the closing chorale (which Aufricht, finding it too "Bachian", wanted to cut, and Caspar Neher, the designer and Weill's future co-librettist, stoutly defended).

Because *The Beggar's Opera* was, among many other things, a parody of the fashionable Handelian opera, the notion that *Die Dreigroschenoper* is likewise parodistic has proved as persistent as it's misleading. When Hindemith's publishers commended *The Beggar's Opera* to his playful attention in 1925, they suggested it as a parody of Eugen d'Albert – not exactly the Handel of his day, popular though his *Tiefland* was (and still is) in Germany. Why not Richard Strauss or,

more wickedly, Pfitzner, Schreker, or Korngold? By 1928, Schreker and Korngold already seemed to belong to a vanished era; and as for Strauss and Pfitzner, their own individual worlds were no threat to Hindemith's or to Weill's. But within a year of the *Dreigroschenoper* premiere, Hindemith would try his hand at parodying Weill, while cohorts of lesser composers were endeavouring to imitate him.

In the German-speaking world, and not only there, the one obvious victim of *Die Dreigroschenoper* was the Playfair-Austin version of *The Beggar's Opera*. Even Benjamin Britten, when he came to make his own masterly version of *The Beggar's Opera*, expressed the hope that after Brecht and Weill the gentility of the 1920 version was a thing of the past. It was then left to a later generation of British composers to consider and rightly reject the notion of yet another *Beggar's Opera*, in which the new target would be the composer of *Gloriana*.

Even if Aufricht had settled for a lesser composer or simply an arranger, it is barely conceivable that in 1928 something so old-hat as Wagner-parody would have been attempted. Yet Wagner was still the arch-enemy of the day, whereas the Handel revival of the 1920s was in no way a relevant target for Brecht, let alone for Weill.

In Brecht as in Gay, the only dramatic juncture at which parody, as distinct from irony, is musically indispensable is at the announcement of the Happy End. Weill's response to the King's Messenger and the royal pardon is immediate and hilarious; yet the hilarity is no less swiftly suppressed, in the interests of a deeply paradoxical conclusion – a happy end that is nothing of the sort.

That ending is one of the many reasons why the "suppressed" aria of Lucy remains a bone of contention. As a parody from first to last, it is plainly at odds with the rest of the numbers. As parody nevertheless – and the allusions are to some of Weill's favourite composers – it prepares for the arrival of the King's Messenger, while threatening to preempt it. What the composer's verdict might be today is anybody's guess. The only concert

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performance of *Die Dreigroschenoper* he ever heard about, and probably the only one in his lifetime, was given in London in 1935, as part of the BBC's Contemporary Music series at the Queen's Hall. It was duly castigated by Ernest Newman and other distinguished critics. Perhaps in memory of that sorry occasion, Weill would have welcomed an opportunity for Lucy to vent her feelings once again.

David Drew

This evening's performance is the first in public to use the new scholarly edition of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, edited by Stephen Hinton and Edward Harsh, and due for publication early in the year 2000 as Vol.I of the Kurt Weill Edition (whose 'Facsimile of the Holograph Full Score' has already been published in a preliminary volume).

All 23 instruments that Weill distributed among the original 7-piece band by dint of complex doublings that were feasible at that time, are incorporated, and the band is accordingly much enlarged.