

David Drew

WEILL'S SCHOOL OPERA

Kurt Weill's school opera Der Jasager—libretto by Brecht, after a Japanese Noh-play—will be heard for the first time in England at a BBC Tuesday Invitation concert on December 21. The conductor is Jacques-Louis Monod.

... a point of demarcation between a generation for whom the dissolution of value had in itself a positive value, and the generation which is beginning to turn its attention to an athleticism, a training, of the soul as severe and ascetic as the training of the body of a runner.

T. S. Eliot (on Proust, 1926)

A school opera will be not only a musical but also an intellectual and a moral training.

Weill (1930)

Der Jasager—literally 'The Yes-Sayer' or, in ironic deference to Nietzsche, 'The Yea-Sayer'—dates from 1930 and is the first modern opera written for schools. It was not, however, the first work Weill had composed for children. In 1921 a Russian 'Children's Ballet' had commissioned from him a 75-minute ballet based on a scenario very similar to that of Debussy's *Boite à joujoux*. The result was *Die Zaubernacht*, an excellent and already characteristic score which was successfully performed in Berlin and New York. In 1924 Weill wrote a *Recordare* for children's chorus plus a normal SATB chorus.

The immediate predecessor of the school opera is the cantata for schools, *Der Lindberghflug* (1929), to a text by Brecht. *Der Lindberghflug* began as a joint work by Weill and Hindemith, commissioned for the 1929 Baden-Baden festival of German chamber music. At that stage it was a chamber cantata for radio, and was so heard at the festival (which was devoted to music for films, for radio, and for amateur groups). After the festival, Weill recomposed the whole work for full orchestra and choir including children's voices. This, the definitive version, was first performed by Klemperer at one of the concerts at the Kroll Opera House. Weill's hopes that the cantata would have a double career in concert halls and schools were not fulfilled.¹ There were two reasons; first, the technical and other demands were too great for most schools; and second, the work was soon overshadowed by the extraordinary career of the much more easily performed *Jasager*.

Der Jasager was written for the Berlin successor of the Baden-Baden festival, *Neue Musik 1930*—organized by Hindemith, Joseph Haas, and Georg Schuenemann. The main theme of the festival was to be music for children. Hindemith himself contributed two 'plays with music' (*Sabinchen* and *Wir bauen eine Stadt*) and Ernst Toch a cantata (*Das Wasser*, to a text by Alfred Döblin); the other composers in this field were Hermann Reutter, Paul

Dessau, and Paul Höffer. *Der Jasager*, however, was withdrawn from the festival, apparently owing to a difference of opinion—over another matter—between Brecht and the organizing committee. Leo Kestenberg's Central Institute for Education then took charge of the work.

The first performance of *Der Jasager* was given by singers and instrumentalists from the Prussian Academy for Church and School Music. It had been prepared by Professor Heinrich Martens, but was conducted, at Weill's request, by a student, Kurt Drabek. The premiere was on 24 June 1930, immediately after the close of the 'Neue Musik' festival. Next day, Weill cabled his publishers: '*Jasager* enormous success. Press without exception brilliant'. He was not exaggerating. It was his greatest critical success yet. 'A new land is conquered with this new school opera—Weill's second great throw', wrote Alfred Einstein. Walter Schrenk called it 'the most mature and consistent work Weill has yet written'. Old friends and old enemies of his music were united in praise of the score. The trio of *Melos* critics (Hans Mersmann, Heinrich Strobel, and Schultze-Ritter), who had curtly dismissed *Sabinchen* and damned *Wir bauen eine Stadt* with faint praise, included *Der Jasager* in their review of the *Neue Musik* festival, and explained their reason for doing so: 'It is particularly regrettable that the organization let slip the work that best fulfils the aims of the festival'.

For three years the progress of *Der Jasager* was uninterrupted. By the end of 1932 it had had over 100 productions in Germany alone, and many more abroad.² All these performances were given by students and schoolchildren. Not only had Weill conceived the work thus. He had asked his publisher to keep the costs of production as low as possible, and for his part had agreed to accept little more than nominal royalties. Only in exceptional circumstances did he allow performances outside schools: a matinée performance at the Krolloper; three separate performances in Vienna (one of which was prepared by the late Erwin Stein), a concert performance in Rome, and another concert performance at the Salle Gaveau in Paris, in December 1932. The latter, in which the work was paired with the *Mahagonny* Songspiel, brought Weill the last and by far the greatest personal triumph of his European career. He was acclaimed from all sides. In *La Revue Musicale*, Henri Prunières said of *Der Jasager*: 'An irresistible force emanates from this simple and naked music... I do not know any musician in Europe who would be capable of producing with such simple means so direct an effect on the mind and the nerves'.

¹But not, however, in England, where the work has remained, until now, unknown. In 1931 it was submitted to the jury for the Oxford ISCM festival, but rejected in favour of Hindemith's *Wir bauen eine Stadt*.

²It is time the cantata was rediscovered. Although uneven, it contains much beautiful and stirring music. No doubt the mere title deters the curious: the obvious but mistaken inference being that the work is simply a journalistic account of Lindbergh's achievement.

'When I am writing for schools', Weill declared in 1930:

I impose above all a strengthened self-control. That is, I must try to achieve an extreme simplicity... But with all kinds of simplicity, I must still give of my best and highest. To be sure, I can also use a simple style in the theatre, but there I can still rely on a supporting framework of more sophisticated and complex material. With children I must stay very strictly within my chosen simplicity. However, I do not believe that one should write a particularly child-like, easily learned music. The music of a school opera must undoubtedly be designed for careful and prolonged study, for in the very study lies its practical value. The actual performance of such a work is far less important than the training derived from rehearsal. This training is in the first place purely musical. But it should, as much if not more, be an intellectual education: through music, a student becomes deeply involved with a definite idea, which he finds in a more plastic form in music and which takes root more firmly than mere book learning... What we have in mind is an exercise in collective thinking. The music itself will be a subject for discussion...

My intention to write a school opera goes back about a year. The term 'school opera' included, to my mind, several possibilities of combining the concept 'schooling' with the concept 'opera'. First, an opera could be an education for a composer or for a generation of composers. At this very moment, when we are concerned to find a new basis for the genre of opera and re-define its boundaries, it is important to create new prototypes of form and examine, in the light of new hypotheses, the structure and content of a primarily musical theatre. In this sense one might regard as school operas Busoni's *Arlecchino*, Hindemith's *Hin und zurück*, Milhaud's *Le pauvre matelot*, and [my own] *Die Dreigroschenoper*.

An opera could also be an education in the interpretation of opera. If we succeed in making the entire musical layout of a stage-work so simple and natural that children can be its ideal performers, then such a work would also be a suitable means for inculcating in opera singers—or those who wish to become opera singers—that simplicity and naturalness which we so often find wanting in our opera houses...

The third interpretation of 'school opera' is one that embraces the first and the second: it is an opera designed for school use. This would belong with those attempts to create musical works in which the music is not an end in itself, but serves those institutions which need and value new music. In addition to the older outlets—concert halls, theatre, radio—two new ones have now emerged: the workers' choirs, and the schools. For us it is rewarding to create for these new outlets large-scale works that meet the technical and material requirements. For that reason I have designed *Der Jasager* in such a way that everything—solo roles, chorus, and orchestra—can be undertaken by students; and I can well imagine that students could also design the scenery and costumes.

Weill wished the role of the mother to be sung by a girl of 14-16, her son by a boy of 10-12, and the teacher by a boy of 16-18. The chorus is SATB. The orchestra consists of flute, clarinet, alto-sax, two

pianos, harmonium, percussion, plucked instruments, and the largest possible body of strings (without violas). The wind instruments, percussion, and plucked instruments are *ad lib*; and the choice of plucked instruments—lutes and mandolins by preference, otherwise guitars, banjos or ukeleles—is left to the performers.

*

It is clear that any professional singers or players engaged in a performance of *Der Jasager* must imaginatively take account of 'difficulties' which for them do not exist. This is indeed a new difficulty. Yet Weill's arguments against professional performances of the work are not inflexible. We have already seen that he himself admits that 'such a work would also be a suitable means for inculcating in opera singers... simplicity and naturalness'. Moreover, he was in no doubt that *Der Jasager* transcends its immediate function: 'Simplicity', he writes,

must not be a constructed primitivity. The fact is, either I possess this simplicity or I do not. Only a simple musician can write simple music. For him, the simple style is not a problem, and simple works are not by-works but central works.

If we add the necessary rider that simple music, if it is inspired, is not merely simple, these remarks, in conjunction with the work itself, are conclusive. *Der Jasager* is indeed a central work. Central, that is, not to the handful of Weill's works at present generally familiar, but to the whole range of his output from 1920 to 1938.

For Weill, the winter of 1929-30 was a turning point. In the autumn of 1929 he had interrupted his work on the scoring of the *Mahagonny* opera to compose the second version of *The Lindbergh Flight*. In the cantata he has already dispensed with the bright and sometimes lurid colours of *Mahagonny*. The neo-classical influence, which was intermittent in *Mahagonny*, now comes to the fore, while the influence of modern popular music is confined to only two of the work's 15 numbers—and even they are scored for a 'neo-classical' ensemble of wind, brass, piano and percussion. The saxophones and banjos have been banished.

In *Der Jasager*—begun in January 1930 and completed in full score four months later—the 'classical' allusions are less overt, and the old 'Song-style' has gone to earth. The popular feeling is still there, but not the 20th-century demotic expressions. If one is reminded of Weill's 19th-century forebears it is not Mahler, the ancestor of so much in *Mahagonny*, but Schubert, one of his earliest loves.

It seems that in composing *Der Jasager*, Weill wished to discover what was essential to him. In this sense, despite all his public theorizing, it is a very private work. It stands like a hermitage at the intersection of two paths: the one that had led him from the relatively complex works of the early 1920s and the one that was yet to lead him to the again relatively complex stage and concert works of the early 1930s. It is true that some of his acts of self-denial in *Der Jasager*—for instance, in the accompanimental textures, where, contrary to his usual practice, he doubles the voices extensively—were determined by practical exigencies. Yet the

ascetic manner is ultimately an expression of the work's inner life and thought.

*

The libretto of *Der Jasager* is by Brecht. It is based on *Taniko*, the 15th-century Noh-play by Zenchiku, a disciple of the great Seami. The source for Brecht's text is Arthur Waley's English version of the original Noh-play, published in 1921 under the title 'The Valley-Hurling'. Brecht's assistant, Elisabeth Hauptmann, had already prepared and published a literal translation of 'The Valley-Hurling'. Brecht and Weill made a few cuts and minor changes, and introduced a new didactic motif. This first appears in an exordium, sung by the full chorus:

Of all things, the most important to study is agreement (*Einverständnis*). Many people say yes, and yet that is no agreement. Many are not asked, and many are in agreement with the wrong things.

The idea is alluded to at the end of the first of the two short acts, and becomes crucial at the dénouement.

There are three main characters in the story: a boy, his widowed mother, and his school-teacher. After the choral overture, the teacher introduces himself to the audience, in Noh-play style. He has come to the mother's house to inquire why the boy was absent from school, and at the same time to say farewell: he is about to lead an expedition through the mountains to a city in which there lives a famous savant. He knocks at the door of the house. The boy answers, and explains that he had been staying at home to look after his mother, who is ill. The mother, hearing of the teacher's journey, asks if he will take her son with him: there is a doctor in the city who may have a cure for her illness. The teacher refuses, saying that the journey is dangerous. He leaves. The boy follows him and begs to be allowed to join the expedition. Much against his will, the teacher agrees to speak to the mother again. She, awakened to the danger, tries to persuade her son to stay at home. He insists that his duty is to fetch the medicine. His proud but now reluctant mother allows him to go.

The second act begins with a repeat of the exordium, followed by the chorus's description of the early stages of the mountain journey. The curtain rises. The party consists of the teacher, three of his older students, and the boy, who is carrying an urn in which he intends to bring back the medicine for his mother. The boy tells the teacher that he is feeling unwell. Strangely disturbed, the teacher silences him and orders him to rest. The three students have overheard the conversation. They remind the teacher of an ancient custom: whoever is unable to proceed on this journey, shall be cast into the valley. The teacher in turn reminds them that the intended victim is allowed a choice. (This is Brecht's and Weill's crucial interpolation.) Slowly, the teacher walks over to where the boy is resting, and explains the 'custom' to him. He asks whether the party should turn back on his account. No, replies the boy. Does

he then accept his fate? Yes, replies the boy. His last words are: 'Take my urn, fill it with medicine, and bring it to my mother when you return'. The three students lift the boy up and carry him towards the edge of the cliff. As they disappear from sight the chorus takes over. The envoi is an almost literal translation of Waley. It describes how the 'friends', sighing for the 'sad ways of the world' and its 'bitter ordinances', make ready for the hurling; and it ends thus (in Waley):

Foot to foot
They stood together
Heaving blindly,
None guiltier than his neighbour.
And clods of earth after
And flat stones they flung.

Curtain.

*

On its own, the libretto is, or seems, brutally authoritarian, and contrary to the liberal humanist principles expressed in the constitution of the Weimar Republic. In this sense, the success of *Der Jasager* in the last and catastrophic years of the Republic was ominous. There is no escaping the fact that the libretto's apparent 'lesson' was endorsed by some parties unfriendly to the Republic and already committed to some kind of 'Führer principle'. No wonder post-war Germany has fought shy of the work. Despite the so-called 'Weill renaissance', *Der Jasager* has had only a handful of performances since 1945.³

However, the work has been virtually disowned on the basis of the very misunderstanding that was responsible for the more disturbing aspects of its fame in the 1930s. The libretto is not intended to be self-sufficient, is not in fact a 'lesson'. It is merely the proposition which the music, taking its cue from the last of the introductory gambits—'many are in agreement with the wrong things'—seeks to refute on broadly humanitarian lines.⁴

Thus the music is, most urgently, a 'subject for discussion'. If the music is as eloquent as Weill intended it to be, then the humanitarian argument prevails. In the 1930s the German admirers of the

³Admittedly there are other reasons for this neglect. The renaissance is to a large extent an extra-musical phenomenon. The works that have been successfully revived are those that satisfy—as *Der Jasager* manifestly does not—a fashionable nostalgia about the Berlin of the 1920s. They are, without exception, works made known by gramophone recordings for which Lotte Lenya's participation was perhaps a *sine qua non*.

⁴There are also clear religious implications. Note for instance the occasional allusions to Bach's Passion style—allusions that also occur in *Der Lindberghflug* (another work about an 'ordeal') and in the second of the two superb apostrophes to the 'Unknown Soldier' in Weill's *Berliner Requiem* of 1928. It is worth remembering, while listening to *Der Jasager*, that five years earlier Weill had composed a set of orchestral songs to poems from Rilke's *Book of Poverty and of Death*. The first of these reads (in J. B. Leishmann's translation: quoted by permission of the Hogarth Press):

Maybe through heavy mountains I am wending,
In hard encivings, like an ore, alone;
and am so deep that I can see no ending
and no horizon: all in nearness blending,
and all that nearness turned to stone.

Anguish I'm still so far from comprehending,
and that's why this great darkness makes me small;
if, though, it's You, get heavy, smash the wall,
that your whole hand on me may be descending,
and you with my whole cry I may befall.

score, unlike the French, failed to notice its critical function. It was not until after 1945 that a German critic resolved the *Jasager* argument in Weill's sense. '*Der Jasager*' wrote this critic, 'is a shattering protest against lazy yes-saying, and a rousing summons to courage in the defence of human dignity'.

Main references:

- Weill: *Der Jasager*. Full score and vocal score, Universal Edition (Vienna) 1930
- Kurt Weill and Dr Hans Fischer: *Aktuelles Zwiegespräch über die Schulooper*. Die Musikpflege (Leipzig) April 1930.'
- Weill: Open letter to the young people of the Netherlands. MS, publication unknown.
- Waley: *The No Plays of Japan*, Allen & Unwin (London) 1921.