Building a model Mahagonny

David Drew hails a staging of Kurt Weill's Mahagonny that at last does justice to the composer's vision.

Meanwhile, something no less extraordinary had been happening in the orchestra pit, where, from the very opening bars, the young Markus Stem had announced himself as an already outstanding opera conductor — or, for those in the audience who had heard him conducting in Berlin's premiere of Henze's Das verbotene Leben, had confirmed that his musicality and his theatrical grip extend far beyond the field of "contemporary" music, and would surely serve him equally well. In, say, Verdi or Stravinsky. How much he achieved with Weill's distinctive and tricky textures could only be suggested by detailed references to the score (not forgetting, here and there, some discreet re-touching) which Weill himself would surely have endorsed. In the broader questions of phrasing and musico-dramatic articulation, Stem's decisions invariably commanded respect, whether or not one agreed with them, and in crucial matters of tempo he was often exemplary, though sometimes — notably in the Act II tableaux — driven much too hard by the exigencies of the staging.

The notorious brothel scene was a case in point. Weill's basic idea was so brilliant and so simple that it defies description except in terms of the programme book's reprint of Marcuse's 1964 observations on the depersonalization of modern society. It was also so primitive, in a relevant sense, that its innately repetitiveness contradicted the music's expressive and developmental functions, and quite literally "minimalised" them. It was characteristic of the production that whereas the entire Jim-Jenny relationship was "de-eroticised" by sundry devices comparable to the one on which the brothel scene depended, in solitary yet impressively telling demonstration of a feeling at once erotic and lyrical, was preserved by Bergaus's memory of how she had, in the words of a man, "including words of love.

From such insights, a production that distanced itself from Weill's self without distorting him, and distanced itself from the fallen Wall, without forgetting either its many human and political equivalents, achieved its ultimate impact on an audience that emerged from the première as astonished and overwhelmed as if the City of Nöts had been discovered for the very first time that very evening.

And with it, a true star had also been discovered. The Romanian-born Gabriel Sadeh has, since 1994, been First Tenor in the New Israeli Opera. Making his début in Stuttgart, he proved to be the Jim Mahoney of Weill's dreams. Amid the amply-deserved ovations for the whole cast and for Bergaus and her team, those for Sadeh were of particular and discriminating intensity. He'd been all the voice of the City and its angered inhabitants.

In the end, however, it is not through any individual performance that this Mahagonny stands as a model and will endure as such, but rather through the strength of its architecture and its informing convictions. Once again Bergaus and his team — including his musical assistant, Frank Schneider — have built something new, from the ground up.

After the final Stuttgart performances this season (June 6 and June 10) there will be at least a dozen more during the 1992-3 season. No-one with an opportunity of visiting Bergaus's Mahagonny should allow themselves to miss it, whether they are already netted by preconceptions, or as free as Bergaus ideologically requires them to be. David Drew is the leading authority on the work of Kurt Weill.