

# Undiscovered Weill

David Drew

*These two extracts from 'Kurt Weill: a Handbook' (published by Faber and Faber on September 28 at £25) have been specially adapted and in the second instance expanded by the author for serialization in OPERA, with the permission of the publishers.*

## 1. Na Und?

In March 1927 Weill completed the full score of a two-act opera provisionally entitled *Na und?* to a libretto by Felix Joachimson—Felix Jackson as he is known today. No libretto or scenario has survived. In a discussion with the present author in 1960, the librettist declared that he had only the haziest recollection of the plot. It concerned, he said, an Italian of humble birth who makes his fortune in America and then returns to his native village to find that his erstwhile fiancée is about to marry another. He abducts her to his mountain retreat, which is then besieged by the outraged villagers.

Jackson was unable to recall the denouement or indeed any other details, except that he had based the libretto on a newspaper story. While that may seem to confirm the impression that *Na und?* was some sort of latterday verismo opera—a slice of Menotti before its time—surviving sections of the voice-and-piano draft (with barely legible text) give a very different impression. So too does the brief description provided by Weill himself, in a letter to his publishers (4 April 1927) enclosing a copy of the libretto:

It is the first operatic attempt to throw light on the essence of our time from within, rather than by recourse to the obvious externals. The theme is the actions and reactions of contemporary man. [ . . . ] It is a type of light-hearted opera that has not been developed since *Der Rosenkavalier*. [ . . . ] not grotesque or parodistic but cheerful and *musikantisch*. The form is: 17 closed numbers, linked by recitatives or melodramas accompanied by piano or chamber ensembles.\*

Technically and stylistically, the extant music is a direct development from *Royal Palace*, and has no leanings towards neo-verismo (or indeed towards *Der Rosenkavalier*). The Italianate aspects are similar to those in *Royal Palace* and are consistent with what Busoni had regarded as desirable in modern opera. Although the jazz elements relate to the hero's American experience they avoid the more obvious Americanisms of *Royal Palace*, while retaining a broadly Expressionist character (notably in the 'Shimmy-song'). Much of the music is still highly dissonant, but the links with traditional tonality have been strengthened, and not only in relation to the frankly popular idioms associated with the milieu. Ideas that Weill was later to use, note for note, in *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* are representative of a general tendency that would surely be confirmed by the complete score. *Na und?* (rather than the Kaiser operas, and more clearly than *Royal Palace*) was both the precursor and the prerequisite of the *Mahagonny* opera.

Approximately a third of the entire draft survives in three separate foldings of 28-line paper. There is also a separate sheet of similar paper which merits prior consideration.

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It appears to have been the outer sheet of a lost folding that carried the greater part of the draft of Act 1. The evidence of that lies in the heading 'Ouvverture' on side *a*, and in the musical character of the *allegro molto* that ensues on sides *a* and *b*. The overture was presumably completed on the next sheet of the folding. It is not a final draft, but a continuity sketch, giving the bare outlines of the polyphonic opening section. The contrasting section begins, in a more homophonic style, with a *molto appassionato* theme (later to be used in *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren*) which is still in full spate at the end of what was probably the last available system (the remaining two staves being taken up by a 13-bar sketch of a tarantella idea that recurs in *Gustav III*). The workings on *c* and *d* have no connection with the previous material or with any of the other *Na und?* drafts; they appear to be memos and sketches for *Herzog Theodor von Gothland*.

The earliest of the three extant foldings carries most of the Act I finale. The start of the finale is missing and was presumably written on the previous folding; otherwise this finale is intact; and it concludes with the words 'Ende I. Akt'.

The legend 'II. Akt' heads the 20 pages of manuscript in a second folding. Unlike the draft of the Act I finale, this substantial fragment gives a clear picture of the kind of formal processes Weill alluded to in his letter to Universal Edition. Although the so-called 'closed forms' are identifiable, it is misleading to suggest that they are merely 'linked', for in fact the musico-dramatic development is continuous, and through-composed in a sense that owes nothing to neo-classical symmetries (and almost nothing to traditional tonality). In the following numbering, the 'intermezzi' are denoted by dashes and the word 'Interlude' is reserved for purely orchestral sections. The first two numberings are Weill's:

- I Aria
- II Duet
  - Interlude –
- [3] Duet scene and recitative
  - Melodrama and Interlude –
- [4] 'Shimmy' (trio)
  - Chorus –
- [5] Duet (*alla turca*)
  - Interlude –

The 'Shimmy'—a trio sung by the hero, Alexander, the Bridegroom, and someone identified simply as 'Amerikaner'—has a doggerel refrain beginning with the words 'Lady Lili You'. The final interlude is a 5/8 time presto for solo piano which is still in progress at the end of the twentieth and last page of manuscript.

The fragment contains several ideas later used in the *Mahagonny* opera. After a hint at one of the characteristic *Mahagonny* ostinatos in the first interlude, the Duet scene has a note-for-note anticipation of the *dolce espressivo* counter-melody at rehearsal figure 127 in Jim Mahoney's *Mahagonny* aria 'Wenn der Himmel hell wird'. The second interlude introduces separately two motifs which in the *Mahagonny* boxing scene (and perhaps elsewhere in *Na und?*) are combined: the quasi-glissando horn motif, and the syncopated answer to it. These too are at the same pitch level as in *Mahagonny*, but the first is in triple rather than common time. Finally the *alla turca* duet adumbrates the driving ostinato rhythm of the final section of the Act I finale in *Mahagonny*.

The third folding carries six sides of discontinuous drafts. The first three of these are headed respectively 'Nach I' ('after I'), 'Nach II', and 'Nach V'. The final item has been partitioned from the others by a horizontal line, and marked 'Schluss 1.

Akt' ('end of the first act'). The fact that this is musically identical with the ending (a humming chorus— cf. *Mahagonny*!) given in the draft of the complete finale indicates that the interpolations were made before the completion of the draft of Act 1. It follows that the idea of linking the 17 'closed forms' with recitatives and melodramas, and also with choruses (as 'Nach II' suggests and the item before the *alla turca* duet confirms) arose during the course of composition.

In a recently discovered letter of 15 June 1927 Weill mentions three of the 17 numbers as follows, and describes them as suitable for non-theatrical use:

das Banjo-Duett Nr. 5  
das Couplet Nr. 7  
der Nigger-Song Nr. 12

Since the 'Nigger-Song' is presumably the 'Lady Lili You' refrain from the 'Shimmy' it is possible to deduce the proportions between the two acts. As already noted, the 'Shimmy' is the fourth of the five numbers in the Act 2 fragment. There are therefore seven numbers missing prior to the Act 1 finale, and another four, including of course a second finale, after the second act's *alla turca* duet.

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Felix Joachimson was born in Berlin in 1903 and studied composition with Weill in 1925-6. After some early experience as a freelance music critic and writer he was appointed Chefdraturg at the Viktor Barnowsky theatre in Berlin, where he was responsible for the engagement of Weill as composer for the innovative production of Strindberg's *Gustav III*. Joachimson had his first major success in September 1927 with *Fünf von der Jazzband*, a comedy directed by Brecht's lifelong collaborator Erich Engel, designed by his and Weill's friend Caspar Neher, and enthusiastically reviewed by Brecht's apostle Herbert Ihering ( *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 23 September 1927, reprinted in Ihering, *Von Reinhardt bis Brecht*, Bd. II, Berlin, 1959, pp. 280ff.). Joachimson continued his career in the German theatre until the advent of Hitler, and then, under the name Felix Jackson, began a second and even more successful career in Hollywood as producer, screenwriter, and novelist.

Universal Edition, in the person of its director Emil Hertzka, expressed some disquiet about the libretto of *Na und?* which Weill had posted from Berlin on 4 April 1927, and asked Weill to come at once to Vienna and play the whole score through. The poor reception of *Royal Palace* in March of that year had undoubtedly put Hertzka and his assistant Hans Heinsheimer on their guard, and the play-through—no easy task for Weill—did not persuade them to accept the work for immediate publication. A letter confirming that Weill was free to negotiate with other publishers followed almost immediately, and on 15 June 1927—just a month before the Baden-Baden premiere of the *Mahagonny-Songspiel*—Weill submitted libretto and score to Schott's in Mainz, with a covering letter in which he described *Na und?* as 'ein Werk leichteren Genres' and cannily selected the three numbers that he thought could be promoted separately. It is important to recall that the rebuff from UE and the approach to Schott took place in the immediate aftermath of the immensely successful world premiere of Krenek's opera *Jonny spielt auf*, which contained several numbers that very soon became popular 'hits'. Schott's publishing policy was centred on the work of Hindemith, and a stray opera from the UE stable would not have been an attractive proposition. Hindemith had already written *Hin und Zurück* with the Berlin revue writer Marcellus Schiffer, and before long was to embark on *Neues vom Tage*, also

with Schiffer, and also, in its way, 'ein Werk leichteren Genres'. On 9 July 1927 Schott wrote to Weill politely rejecting *Na und?*, and returning the manuscript.

The premiere of the *Mahagonny-Songspiel* at Baden-Baden later that month was attended by Otto Klemperer and Hans Curjel, Klemperer's Chefdraturg at the newly formed Oper am Platz der Republik, or Kroll-Oper as it was popularly known. Since Universal Edition had intimated that they would reconsider *Na und?* if Weill succeeded in gaining the interest of a major opera house, we may assume that once Schott had turned down his offer, Weill took the earliest opportunity of approaching the Kroll administration—certainly at Baden-Baden, if not before.

According to Curjel—in a verbal account to the present author—the score and libretto of *Na und?* were delivered to his office at the Kroll and remained there for some months. But meanwhile Curjel had become one of the leading advocates of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, over which Klemperer was later to hesitate so painfully. According to Curjel, Weill continued to press the case for *Na und?* until he, Curjel, produced the score from a cupboard in his office, and persuaded Weill to re-read it there and then. At the end of the reading, or so the story goes, Weill quietly closed the score, and with a shrug of his shoulders and a sheepish grin, tucked it under his arm, and left.

The story has at least a ring of truth, which is more than can be said of the popular legend that Weill had already dropped the score from his train window into the Danube after Universal Edition had rejected it. (In fact Weill was not in the habit of destroying his scores—losing them or giving them away suited his temperament better.) The German musicologist Herbert Fleischer was sure that *Na und?* was not among the early unpublished scores he took to Italy in 1933; and Lenya was equally certain that after the Nazi seizure of power she entrusted it once again to Curjel. But Curjel's own recollections of the score did not extend into the 1930s. *Na und?* is not only the largest of Weill's lost works. In terms of his creative evolution—as the fragments of the draft demonstrate—it is by far the most important.

So long as there remains any hope for its discovery, there can be no last word on the subject. It therefore seems more appropriate to end these notes with the two words with which Weill and Joachimson began. In his letter to Schott, Weill declared that 'the title is not yet final' ('Der Titel ist noch nicht endgültig'). *Na und?* is generally translated as the German equivalent of 'So what?'. But the Americanism misses its various resonances. Among them is 'What next?'. In that sense it was not an altogether inappropriate title for the predecessor of *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren* and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*.

## 2. Weill and the German emigration

In September 1935 Weill sailed from Cherbourg to New York—not, as legend would have it, to make his home in the USA, but simply in order to supervise the musical side of Max Reinhardt's production of *The Eternal Road*, the original German version of which, entitled *Der Weg der Verheissung*, he and Franz Werfel had just completed. A vast and multiform piece relating, in a strictly contemporary context, the story of the Jewish people from the time of Moses to that of the destruction of the Second Temple, *The Eternal Road* was due to be staged at the Manhattan Opera House in January 1936. Weill's intention was then to return to his home near Paris. But various factors, including the cost of reconstructing the Manhattan Opera House in order



*Weill in Hollywood at the time of the Mannheim project*

to accommodate the mammoth sets, eventually bankrupted the production company and caused the postponement of the premiere indefinitely.

Like Werfel, who had likewise travelled to New York (with his wife Alma) to supervise the production, Weill had now to decide whether to return to Europe and await the next call to *The Eternal Road*, or apply for an extension of his temporary visa and chance his luck in the USA. Werfel and his wife decided in favour of Europe, as Weill was apparently inclined to do and certainly would have done had a hoped-for ballet commission from René Blum materialized. But the possibility of an even more attractive ballet commission in the USA supervened and although nothing came of it, he contrived in the meantime to forge links with the Group Theatre. By the summer of 1936 he had already embarked on *Johnny Johnson* for the Group Theatre. The New York premiere in November of that year preceded by six weeks the long-delayed opening of *The Eternal Road*.

The success of *Johnny Johnson* led directly to the collaboration with Clifford Odets and Lewis Milestone on what was envisaged as a Group Theatre film—*The River is Blue*, a drama of the Spanish Civil War adapted from a novel by Ilya Ehrenburg. Odets's script was eventually rejected by the producers, but not before Weill had composed the score for it and embarked on a second film, this time for Fritz Lang.

Thanks to his Hollywood work Weill was no longer living from hand to mouth. By the Summer of 1937 his position in the USA, difficult though it still was, compared very favourably with anything Europe could offer him. A letter from Werfel congratulating him on his good fortune, and expressing grave misgivings about the future in Europe, can only have strengthened his resolve. In August 1937 he took his first steps towards American citizenship.

As he surely knew, the consequences for his future would be immense. If at that



stage he still had little inkling of how that future would turn out, he was none the less convinced about the rightness of the decision itself. The psychology of it had already been exposed in a project on which he had worked with the playwrights Samuel and Bella Spewack and the lyric-writer E. Y. Harburg during his Hollywood stay.

The project is the missing connection between Weill's last experiences as a German composer and the work with which he made his full-scale Broadway debut in 1938—*Knickerbocker Holiday*. It belongs to the transitional period in which he was exploring the practicability of a quadrilateral career-structure that could be upturned, inverted, or reshaped according to requirements. Although his main hopes for the future were still centred on the Federal Theatre, he had found, through the Group Theatre and through Clifford Odets, a convenient short-cut between the 'progressive' sectors of Broadway and Hollywood. In Hollywood especially there were no clear lines of demarcation between the intelligentsia and the entertainers. According to Ronald Sanders (*The Days Grow Short*, p. 260), it was in the Beverly Hills villa of George and Ira Gershwin that Weill first met Harburg and the Spewacks (the Gershwins he had already met at the 1935 premiere of *Porgy and Bess*). The producer Max Gordon was involved in the project from the start, and was soon seeking the necessary financial backing for a Broadway production during the season 1937-8. He did not succeed.

There are two widely different but to some extent complementary accounts of the subject matter. The earlier by some 40 years was by Weill himself, in a letter to Lenya written (in German) from Hollywood on 29 March 1939:

The action begins in the Mannheim opera house. The rehearsal is suddenly interrupted by a Nazi, who dismisses everyone from their posts because they are non-Aryans. They all go to New York. We now show their experiences—naturally with much humour, but also, for instance, in a scene where they receive a letter from a Mannheim friend which was to be mailed only in the event of the friend's death.

Eventually another friend arrives from Germany, and tells them that everything has been arranged so that they can return. But they reply that they will not return. At the end, in the cinema of a small American country town, they perform the opera that they had been rehearsing at the start of the first act.\*

Never before had Weill agreed to a subject that directly reflected his personal experience (nor was he to do so again in so overt a manner). It is hard to judge how far he expected Lenya to grasp what he was driving at, but the choice of Mannheim was surely intended to deflect the kind of questions that would have been prompted by Berlin or even Hamburg—the two major cities in which productions of *Die Bürgschaft* and *Der Silbersee* were being actively prepared at the time of the Nazi seizure of power. The present writer, in his forthcoming Weill biography, argues that the Mannheim location enabled Weill to merge his own experience with that of his slightly younger contemporary Berthold Goldschmidt (born in Hamburg, in 1903). Goldschmidt's opera *Der gewaltige Hahnrei* was published by Universal Edition and first performed in Mannheim a month before the Berlin premiere of *Die Bürgschaft*.

Although the musical style and dramatic content of *Der gewaltige Hahnrei* were far removed from his own preoccupations of the time, Weill took a fraternal interest in the work and according to Goldschmidt (at the Kurt Weill Conference in Yale in November 1983) vigorously defended it, at some risk to his own professional interest. The last successful operatic debut in pre-Hitler Germany, *Der gewaltige Hahnrei* was

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*Berthold Goldschmidt in Darmstadt, 1929, during the composition of 'Der gewaltige Hahnrei'*

for political reasons shunned by the opera houses that had expressed an interest in producing it during the season 1932-3. In the summer of 1932, when the political situation in Germany seemed to be improving, Mannheim began negotiations for *Die Bürgschaft*, while the Städtische Oper in Berlin resolved to give further performances of *Die Bürgschaft* during the 1932-3 season and to present *Der gewaltige Hahnrei* during the following season. Mannheim's negotiations for *Die Bürgschaft* hung fire and were never completed, and Berlin's further performances were postponed from month to month for security reasons until there was no security left—whereupon virtually every German opera manager and conductor who would have wished, let alone dared, to advocate such works as *Die Bürgschaft* and *Der gewaltige Hahnrei* was 'released' from his duties.

For all their differences, the two operas, like the two cities in which they were first performed, were interchangeable symbols of the culture that was destroyed in 1933. Given that Weill was now beginning to settle down in America, the passage in his account of the Spewack-Harburg project that deals with the company's decision not to return to Germany is again charged with personal significance. Returning to France would for him have been the only practical course at that time; but nothing would alter the fact that his roots were in Germany.

By 1937 Weill knew quite enough about Broadway to realize that the fate of 20th-century German opera was not a topic likely to endear his project to prospective backers, and that in human terms the same story might be acceptable on the level of light entertainment. We can be sure that by the time Max Gordon began his unsuccessful quest for financial backing, Weill's 'opera' company had been converted into something rather less forbidding (and perhaps closer to the Shakespeare company that figures in the Spewack-Cole Porter musical *Kiss Me Kate*). Some such development

is implicit in the story outline given to Ronald Sanders by Harburg in the late 1970s (*op. cit.*, pp. 260-1):

The story concerned a Jewish theatrical group that, in better days, had regularly toured Germany giving musical comedies that they themselves had written. At the beginning of the play they have fled Nazi Germany and are on their way to the United States: they are first seen aboard ship trying to rehearse and prepare their favourite show for its new American career. But since they had been forced to leave the score behind in their hurried escape from Germany, they have to rely on memory to reconstitute the music. Most of it comes back quickly, but the waltz that always climaxed the show resists their recollections. In the end they put on their show in America, and the waltz gradually emerges through the course of it, coming out fully defined at last in the finale.

The notion of a 'forgotten' music that has somehow to be recovered seems relevant to Weill's psychological condition in 1937 and was to reappear in *Lady in the Dark*. Here, its personal associations are enhanced by the score which is 'left behind' by the musicians 'in their hurried escape', just as Weill had left many of his own scores behind. The closest match between Harburg's recollections and Weill's personal experiences is, however, in a supplementary passage concerning the letter song: 'a letter from a member of the troupe to the "Aryan" occupant of his apartment back in Germany, asking how the old things—the books, pictures, furniture, and so on—were doing.' In Paris in 1933 Weill was writing to Lenya in Berlin about the contents of his house, the settling of his debts, and the details of their divorce.

No lyrics and no musical sketches or drafts relating to this project are known to have survived. Weill's letters to Lenya from Hollywood of April-May 1937 confirm that the project was very much alive during that period; and on June 7 he claimed to have composed five 'very good songs' for it. Sanders (*op. cit.*, p. 261) gives the impression, without actually stating, that Harburg had remembered Weill writing music prior to the arrival of the few lyrics Harburg sketched. It is unlikely that Max Gordon would have begun his search for financial backing without several playable numbers, of which one would have had to be the *valse oubliée*.

Among the few idiosyncratic ideas in *The River is Blue* that is not a borrowing from a known Weill score is a large-scale waltz with variations. Although redolent of *Der Kuhhandel*, it fits neatly into the musical area between Weill's and Harburg's accounts of the story outline. But unless and until a direct connection is established, we are left with the irony that all the music Weill managed to write for an unfinished play about a lost score has itself been lost.

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Weill's notion of an opera premiere in 'the cinema of a small American town' was wholly topical in the era of the New Deal's Federal Theatre Project and of the operatic off-shoots that were beginning to appear just as the WPA's political enemies were preparing to kill the Project off. It is no mere coincidence that a small opera company designed strictly for touring purposes was one of the first concerns of Weill's contemporary Ernst Krenek when he arrived in the USA in 1938.

Among the European composers of Weill's generation Krenek alone had previously enjoyed a success in the theatre that was roughly comparable to Weill's. Yet in the USA his dramatic compositions—like Weill's in this respect and no other—were confined to stages far removed from the Metropolitan Opera. Whereas Weill's path was unique, Krenek's was entirely typical: for most of the immigrant composers the campus theatre and the community centre, the radio and later the television studio, were the relevant venues. What was true for Hindemith, Weill, and Krenek—not to mention Schoenberg with his uncompleted *Moses und Aron*—was of course doubly



true for such figures as Ernst Toch, Karol Rathaus, and Max Brand (to mention just three immigrants who had been successful in the state theatres of Germany). A history of the Metropolitan Opera's desultory involvement with the modern repertoire during the 15 years Weill lived in the USA would certainly be relevant to the study of why the truly representative 'operas' of the immigrant composers are such 'small town' works as *Down in the Valley*, *The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* (Lukas Foss) and *The Long Christmas Dinner* (Hindemith).

One has only to recall the predicament of opera composers in Britain in the era before *Peter Grimes* to understand that of their American counterparts during the same period, and indeed ever since. It is, however, one of the telling ironies of opera history that the first American performance of *Peter Grimes* was conducted by Leonard Bernstein, one of the very few American composers who was intellectually and temperamentally capable of grasping the fact that America had its very own *Grimes* in the shape of *Porgy and Bess*, a work that had been cold-shouldered by most of the operatic and critical establishment, not to mention many of Bernstein's confrères. For Weill the importance of *Porgy* had been self-evident from the start (he attended the premiere shortly after his arrival) and in advocating the work's adoption by, and adaptation to, Broadway as distinct from the operatic stage, he was consciously defining his future up to and including the premiere of his *Porgy*-orientated *Street Scene*.

In the 1940s and early 1950s the creative gulf between Broadway and Shaftesbury Avenue was far wider than any cultural gulf between the Met and the brave new world of British opera. It was in the post-*Grimes* euphoria that the Arts Council of Great Britain, in alliance with the Royal Opera House, announced an opera competition as part of the 1951 Festival of Britain. Anonymous submissions of a complete libretto and one sample scene were invited from composers resident in the UK, on the understanding that the four 'winners' would be honoured with a commission. When the distinguished panel of judges had made its choice, it was by all accounts greatly disconcerted to find that the four prize-winning names in the sealed envelopes were (in alphabetical order) Arthur Benjamin, Alan Bush, Berthold Goldschmidt, and Karl Rankl. While Benjamin's *A Tale of Two Cities* and Bush's *Wat Tyler* were eventually to see the light of day—though not under the auspices of the Festival of Britain nor, of course, at the Royal Opera House—Goldschmidt's *Beatrice Cenci* and Rankl's *Dierdre of the Sorrows* remain unpublished and unstaged to this day.

To judge from the score and the recording of a few excerpts broadcast in 1953 on the occasion of the composer's 50th birthday, Goldschmidt's *Beatrice Cenci* is a mature composer's full-blooded reply—through Shelley, but still in his native musical language—to the youthful fire and Expressionist geometry of *Der gewaltige Hahnrei*. Next April, *Beatrice Cenci* will be heard for the first time, in a concert performance at the South Bank Centre. Welcome though the prospect is, there can be little doubt that the neglect of the work by opera institutions in the composer's adopted country has been one of the factors that explains why in his native country there has as yet been no sign of interest in *Der gewaltige Hahnrei*, despite the fact that for the past three decades the more adventurous German opera houses have been combing the Universal Edition catalogue for important or at least interesting operas from the pre-Hitler era and are now even extending their researches to opera composers who found favour in the Third Reich.

In the annals of modern 'British' opera Goldschmidt's *Beatrice Cenci* is cousin to Roberto Gerhard's *The Duenna*—likewise a product of the post-*Grimes* euphoria,

and likewise still awaiting its first staging. Such works are representative casualties from an era in which proven as well as potential opera composers were for political and cultural reasons prevented from fulfilling some or all of their ambitions and promise. Even today—and in some lands especially today—the equivalent of Weill's 'cinema in a small American town' is a vital adjunct to the survival of musical theatre.

*David Drew's next two volumes on Weill—one biographical and one concerned with the Brecht collaboration—are planned for publication in 1990.*