

The precise point where Weill's and Brecht's paths diverged is not to be found on the maps of Brecht's career which were made in the 1950s and early 1960s¹, since Weill's path is never even marked—though sometimes a small and misplaced arrow with the legend "to Broadway" points towards the margin. The vagueness was characteristic of a time when the musical world was not inclined to question the natural assumptions of Brecht scholars about the composers (apart from Hindemith) who had worked with Brecht. The assumptions were twofold, and interdependent: first, that Brecht created Weill in his own image, then became disappointed in him, and created Eisler; secondly, that the activities of these composers outside the region of the collaboration were not of any significance².

Such was the trap from which the discovery of Eisler has released us. Now that Eisler is firmly established in his own right, interest in Weill's career before and after the collaboration with Brecht has significantly increased, and is manifesting itself in the performance and enthusiastic reception of major works dating from both those periods. A spontaneous and gradual development of this kind was always more appropriate to Weill's case than any sudden revelation, and also more to be expected. For what was once considered sensational in Weill may no longer seem so; while much that is of enduring value lies beneath the surface and is only to be discovered by the patient and attentive ear.

A quarter of a century can be a painfully long time for friends waiting in hope, but is a very short one in the dispassionate view of history. It may be that we have now reached a point where it is possible to recover the kind of perspective on Weill which was lost after 1933 and still missing at the time of his death. An attempted return to the original positions would of course be futile, since time and experience have rendered them inaccessible just as surely as political events had previously rendered them uninhabitable. Nevertheless we need, for our own safety, to take account of those positions, and then to plot

Kurt Weill and his critics—2

By David Drew

them on the map with some care if we are to benefit from the old insights while avoiding the old errors.

Some such aerial survey was the original objective of my recent anthology, *Über Kurt Weill* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp). But when a representative selection of the most important articles written in Weill's lifetime had been arranged in an order determined mainly by the chronology of his compositions, fortuitous effects of continuity became dangerously deceptive, in that they concealed the inevitable gaps and hence the fact that certain important works or even whole groups of works were not discussed.

The largest of these groups were at the beginning and at the end. The earlier gap was inevitable, since Weill's contemporaries had little opportunity of discovering the unpublished works of 1920-24, some of which were much superior to the first works to reach print, and all of which showed extraordinary promise. The final group presented quite another problem. With one exception (and even that is discouragingly and misleadingly entitled *Love Life*, Weill's Broadway works of the 1940s did not invite the kind of critical attention which even the slightest of his works of the 1920s and 1930s had generally received; and even if they merited such attention, the intelligentsia were not inclined to give it. True, their dismay at his first work for the Broadway stage, *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938), had less to do with the score itself than with the fact that the admired composer of *Die Dreigroschenoper* seemed to have made his peace with show business instead of writing a new *Mahagonny-Songspiel* for an American Baden-Baden³; but dismay turned to outright disgust with the appearance in January 1941 of the first of Weill's "smash hits", *Lady in the Dark*⁴.

Whereas *Knickerbocker Holiday* directly concerned political issues of the day, and thus belied the implications of its title, the drama of *Lady in the Dark* explored a pseudo-psychoanalytical dream-world in which the symbols are not sexual but frankly and indeed "outrageously" commercial. Many of Weill's old admirers were so shocked that they hastened away from the scene of his American work never to return. And yet, had they reminded themselves of how often in criticism shocked reactions have indicated the arrival of something new, and had they known how deeply shocked certain of Weill's earliest admirers had been by *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny*, they might have paused long enough to recover the use of their ears.

They were, however, justified in remarking that the composer of *Die Dreigroschenoper* was nowhere identifiable in *Lady in the Dark*, and mistaken only in assuming that such an observation already constituted an indictment: Stravinsky, the supreme master of self-affirming "disguises", was another old admirer of *Die Dreigroschenoper*; and yet he saw fit to go on stage and congratulate the composer after the première of *Lady in the Dark*⁵.

It is never more dangerous to underestimate Weill's intelligence than when it is applied to forms that have enjoyed a long and intimate association with foolishness. Unlike *Knickerbocker Holiday*, which still has many roots in Europe, the music of *Lady in the Dark* seems to have been snatched from the very air of Broadway and Hollywood. Far more extreme than *Die Dreigroschenoper* in its repudiation of everything that the traditions of Western art have sought to conserve even in their revolutionary phases, it is nothing if not the expression of a cultural crisis which was also a personal one. The

old intelligence meets the new demands in a somewhat disconcerting way. It is almost as if Weill had now—at the start of the war in Europe—decided that he had nothing to lose and perhaps something to gain by playing the kind of role that Adorno had written for him ten years earlier. For it is surely in *Lady in the Dark* (rather than *Die Dreigroschenoper* or *Mahagonny*) that the destruction of transitions, connexions and associations becomes a creative principle, while traditional "values" are ignored or mocked. The music of *Lady in the Dark* is no stranger to what Adorno calls the "Nachbarschaft des Wahnsinns". Indeed it is an almost clinically accurate analysis of the reaction-formations and localized amnesias characteristic not only of the drama's heroine and the consumer-society which she (and the dramatist) admires, but also of the composer's own defensive tactics in that year of decision.

If *Lady in the Dark* is outwardly the least "personal" score Weill had yet written, inwardly it is the nearest to being a subconscious form of autobiography. After seven hard years in which—try as he would—he had never quite been able to forget his inalienable links with the land where he had been born and where his forebears had lived since the fourteenth century, he had now succeeded at last in banishing from his music almost every trace of his musical background and upbringing. His farewell to his native tongue was already composed. Dated December 22, 1939 it takes the form of a setting of the lyric from Brecht's *Die Rundköpfe und die Spitzköpfe* whose refrain is Villon's:

Wo sind die Tränen von gestern
Abend,
Wo ist der Schnee vom vergangenem
Jahr?

Acceptable but essentially false answers to questions of that sort

are given in the play of *Lady in the Dark*, while the unacceptable and true answers are hidden, along with much else, far beneath the surface of the music. The wish for anonymity implicit in the character of the entire score, but fortunately not fulfilled in it, is best understood in the context of the events which took place in Europe during the six months Weill devoted to the work. While the play belongs to the period of the so-called "phoney war", the first sketches for the music were made shortly after the war began in earnest—in fact, almost immediately after the destruction of Rotterdam; and by the time the score was complete, the continent of Europe, as Weill had known it, was no more.

How far Weill was aware of the self-censoring processes in the music is hard to judge exactly, and in any case not important. What matters is the astonishing subconscious activity set in motion by those processes. A score fashioned with superb science from nothing but the silicates of contemporary popular music becomes a weirdly coloured distorting mirror in which the playwright's indomitably banal fantasies and the lyric-writer's clever cocktail-party jokes take on the aspect of scenes from the final chapters of *Steppenwolf* rewritten by Nathanael West and staged by Adrian Leverkühn's favourite director. Now that time has stripped the score of its show-business actuality, the gaiety begins to sound hellish—which is to say, characteristic of a composer whose art, like Mahler's, had, at a very early stage, acquired from its Christian contexts a lively sense of the purgatorial.

Yet the change was profound, and not just another of Weill's many changes of manner. As Herbert Fleischer suggests (in *Über Kurt Weill*), Weill's various European manners (like Stravinsky's) were aspects of a central style which never changed once it had formed, and which was one of the most distinctive in twentieth-century music. That style was defined not by the superficial aspects that tended to attract attention at the time, but by the very bone-structure—the characteristic *Stimmführung*, the interrelation of timbre

and tempo, and so on. It is the bone-structure which, by means of graftings and excisions, has changed in *Lady in the Dark*. Not, it is true, out of all recognition; but sufficiently to suggest little more than a remote family relationship.

It is hardly surprising that Weill's old admirers were taken aback. But their failure to discover anything in the score apart from a more or less skilful use of the popular idioms to which they were (so to speak) professionally opposed, stemmed from a failure to consider whether there might be some connexion between the character of the score and the Freudian concept of repression which—in a trivialized form—was what the play pretended to be about. In fact, everything that keeps *Lady in the Dark* alive, and everything that makes it one of the key works in Weill's output, belongs to the areas of subconscious activity demarcated by the repression of his "European" impulses. The imposed standards are those which he identifies with the America he had now learnt to love—not without difficulty, yet with a boundless sense of gratitude.

Thus the clue to the famous "problem" of Weill's transformation into a Broadway composer and hence to all the works he wrote during the last ten years of his life had been missed at the first and best opportunity—the one moment when it was clearly visible and could have been found by anyone with a reasonably wide and thorough knowledge of Weill's musical aims and achievements in the past two decades. Each of the phases in his mature development owes its distinctive character and much of its dynamism to the ruthless suppression or repression of salient characteristics of the previous phase.

Musically the pattern defies brief summary, but its other connotations are clear enough. The first mature works belong to the period when religious standards—in opposition to Busoni's atheism—establish a strict censorship over the erotic (post-*Tristan*) impulses characteristic of the previous



A scene from the recent production of Weill's *Happy End* at the Lyric Theatre, London.

works; in the next main phase, the religious is likewise censored by the social elements with which—for instance in the *First Symphony*—it had once coexisted. The erotic may now return, but only briefly and by the back door; and it is again completely repressed (with strange effect) in the male-dominated *Bürgschaft* and *Silbersee*, as if in preparation for the return of the religious: *Der Weg der Verheissung* (1934-35) is the first mature work in which Weill—under pressure of the political events which influenced Schoenberg's contemporary return to the Jewish faith—consciously writes as a Jew (though still as unmistakably German as Mendelssohn).

The transitional phase to which *Der Weg der Verheissung* belongs

was disturbed and unnaturally prolonged by the political and personal upheavals of the time. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that until the end of the 1930s Weill felt himself to be on the threshold of a new period in which he would be able to bring together and consolidate all that he had absorbed as a European artist, including what he had recently absorbed from the New World. But, as we have seen, the new period initiated by *Lady in the Dark* was characterized by precisely the opposite objective, with the result that the old mechanisms of repression can no longer function creatively. Whereas in the previous periods the repression of one impulse was simultaneous with the release of another within the confines of an integrated personality

and therefore under its authority, now the entire network of impulses and authority is driven back into the "dark" by enforced standards which are not part of the personality's accumulated store.

Hence the Broadway works differ from their predecessors not only in manner; they differ in kind, in style in the deepest sense of that word. To apply to the Broadway works the criteria appropriate to the European works (or vice versa) is therefore pointless. Weill's attempt to evolve a consistent secondary persona is unique in the history of significant composition—as opposed to epigonism—and requires a corresponding and difficult adjustment on the part of everyone who is accustomed to evaluate an artist's late works in the light of his earlier ones.

It would have been too much to expect Weill's contemporaries in American "serious music" to make that adjustment—the most that could be hoped for was the kind of respect for residual craftsmanship exhibited by Elliott Carter in his note on *One Touch of Venus* (reprinted in *Über Kurt Weill*, as are all the pieces referred to below). But Carter proved to be almost the last notable musician to write about a new work of Weill's during the composer's lifetime. After *Lady in the Dark*, the Broadway theatre critics became the main custodians of Weill's reputation, and they of course were quite unprejudiced by any real awareness of Weill's musical past. In that sense Weill was not mistaken in his belief that verdicts on his Broadway works were better left to them than to most of the American music critics. But the drama critics were hardly equipped to understand the inner workings of so unusual a musical mind, and consequently their praise was often as wide of the mark as their criticism. There is more to be learnt about the Broadway Weill from the natural simplicity and human warmth of Langston Hughes's tribute to him than from all the reviews that appeared in the New York press during Weill's lifetime. But it is to Mary McCarthy's essay on the Broadway season of 1943-44 that we must turn for a sense of Weill's cultural predic-

ament after the success of *Lady in the Dark*, and (more especially) after America's entry into the war. Not that Miss McCarthy discusses the music, or even seems aware of the bearing her remarks might have on the work of a German-born intellectual working in the Broadway theatre during that uncomfortable winter. But the predicament she discusses was part of his own; and each of his subsequent shows was related to it.

Alone among Weill's Broadway shows, *One Touch of Venus* was almost entirely conventional in form, and ran no risks apart from the ones noted by Miss McCarthy. As an entertainment for audiences sorely in need of it, it sprang from the kind of work Weill had been doing in factories and elsewhere as his contribution to America's war effort, and consequently is both the slightest and the least troubled of his Broadway works. *Love Life*, which is perhaps the most substantial of those works, and certainly the most troubled, is unmistakably a product of the immediate post-war era. Part of the repressed European background is now trying to re-emerge.

A full and just appraisal of Weill's work for Broadway will become possible when his earlier work has been fully reappraised, and not before. Meanwhile, some words which appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune* on April 9, 1950—five days after Weill's death—may be found helpful. They follow an assessment of "the epoch-making works of his German period", and support the opening claim that "he was probably the most original single workman in the whole musical theatre, internationally considered, during the last quarter century".

Whether Weill's American works will carry as far as his German ones I cannot say. They lack the mordant and touching humanity of Brecht's poetry. They also lack a certain acidity in the musical characterization that gave a cutting edge to Weill's musical style when he was working in the German language. Nevertheless they are important to history. And his last musical play, *Lost in the Stars*, for all that it lacks the melodic appeal

of *Mahagonny* and even of *Lady in the Dark*, is a masterpiece of musical application to dramatic narrative; and its score, composed for twelve players, is Weill's finest work of orchestral craft. His so-called "folk opera", *Down in the Valley*, is not without strength either. Easy to perform and dramatically perfect, it speaks an American musical dialect that Americans can accept. Its artfulness is so concealed that the whole comes off as naturally as a song by Stephen Foster, though it lasts a good half hour. . . . Just at present the American musical theatre is rising in power. But its lighter wing has lost in Kurt Weill a workman who might have bridged for us the gap, as he did in Germany, between grand opera and the Singspiel. The loss to music and to the theatre is real. Both will go on, and so will Weill's influence. But his output of new models—and every new work was a new model, a new shape, a new solution of dramatic problems—will not continue. Music has lost a creative mind and a master hand.

The author of those words was the distinguished composer and critic Virgil Thomson, whose relationship to Weill's music had begun in Paris at the time of Weill's triumph there. It was characteristic of Thomson and his always illuminating idiosyncrasies that he saw Weill as a kind of German Satie⁶; and for a composer who could hardly be further removed from all things German, it was perhaps the best way to see him. But the works Thomson had heard and fallen in love with in Paris during the early 1930s did not represent the whole of Weill, or anything like it: and it is only with some sense of the whole that we can hope to understand, and be fair to, the individual works, be they weak or strong.

That sense of Weill's art as a living and developing organism informs everything of value that was written about it by his contemporaries in Germany, and is surely worth trying to recover. In shying away from the academic or museum concept of an "oeuvre"—as Weill himself did in his last years—we risk overlooking not only the growth from strong roots which is as necessary to artistic forms as it is to social ones, but also the subtle balances and complex interrelationships which it created between individual works, to the enrichment of them all.

In that sense it is particularly unfortunate that the available literature on Weill contains no substantial studies of certain key-works. The *Divertimento*, the *Recordare*, the *Rikeliender*, *Royal Palace*, *Der Lindberghflug*, *Der Silbersee*—each for a different reason was denied due attention in Weill's lifetime, with the result that other important works—above all, *Der Jasager*—were partly or wholly misunderstood even by admirers.* In every case but one, these were normal accidents of life and criticism, to which the work of every artist is prone, and doubly so if, like Weill, he is an innovator. The exception is *Der Silbersee*.

First performed, with great success, in Leipzig, Magdeburg and Erfurt only nine days before the burning of the Reichstag, *Der Silbersee* was almost immediately swept from the stage by the political events which drove its composer from his homeland, and separated him from the only public he had ever consciously set out to communicate with. It was not performed again during his lifetime, or indeed for many years after his death.

Some premonition of what was to come is clearly felt in the music and in the work as a whole.

*After forty years the contemporary literature on *Der Jasager* makes depressing reading. Even the most friendly critics of that much-admired work seemed quite unaware of how and to what ends the music is working. The fact that Heinrich Strobel, in one passing reference twenty years later, tells us more about the work as Weill composed it than any of its contemporary expositors (including Weill himself) suggests that the age of Brüning had to give way to the age of Hitler before the prophetic truth was revealed. And yet today the misunderstandings of *Der Jasager* are greater than ever—witness the attempts to attach Weill's *Jasager* score to the text of Brecht's *Der Neinsager*.

Although its musico-dramatic form prevents it from competing with the finest of Weill's through-composed works, it is certainly the weightiest of his scores for the spoken theatre in Germany. It is also the one that finally makes explicit that concern for a humane and rational social order which had been implicit in all his major works since the *Symphony* of 1921. Perhaps it was the feeling that it might be his farewell to the German stage that impelled him to give *Der Silbersee* something of the character of a *Bekennniswerk* (and if it was, a comparable feeling informed the last work he completed before his death in America; for *Lost in the Stars* precisely complements *Der Silbersee*, but this time on a level accessible to Broadway audiences). "In those days Weill wrote the score for *Der Silbersee*", recalled Georg Kaiser in 1941; "it was a magnificent thing. And it is an immortal thing, for art lives longer than all politics."⁷

Some account of *Der Silbersee* and the events that followed its first performance is essential to even the briefest survey of Weill's career, for without it the first half lacks its tragic ending, and the second is incomprehensible. Since the absence of any considered appraisal of the work is no accident, and therefore in no way comparable to the lacunae which we may reluctantly accept as normal, *Der Silbersee* clearly calls for exceptional treatment. To that extent at least, any collection of notable articles by Weill's contemporaries requires a documentary substructure. The necessary connexions have then to be made, for the suppression of *Der Silbersee* was not a sudden quirk of fate. A clear line of development extends from the apparently non-political riot at the first Leipzig performance of *Mahagonny* to the overtly political campaign against *Die Bürgschaft* organized in the provinces by the Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur⁸ and supported by the Goebbels-press. With the victory over *Der Silbersee* the practical side of the campaign had achieved its ends.

Among the many versions of the theoretical *Endlösung* of the "Weill Question", the one published by the Pfitzner-biographer Walter Abendroth in 1936 is perhaps the most succinct:

We need say no more here about the nature and aims of operatic Jewry, because the energy with which [...] the smutty cabaret talent of a Weill was made out to be strong enough to create a style is still fresh enough in everyone's memory.⁹

What is interesting about such views of Weill's talent is that they were widely shared in other countries—especially England—during the mid-1930s, and that they were still circulating long after the end of the Third Reich. Likewise, the interpretation of *Mahagonny* given in the *Lexikon der Juden in der Musik* is only a particularly crass version of one that spread throughout the musical world at the time of the first productions, and continued to be accepted at face value by scholars whose respectability was unimpeachable.¹⁰

In the context of serious criticism, documents from the Nazi press stand out like gargoyles on a gothic building, and like them they may perform both a practical and a moralistic function. For while helping to keep the rainwater from the walls, they may also serve as a reminder of how easily the liberal and humane objectives of criticism can be subverted even in a "free" society. In the present context, these relics from a past we would prefer to forget have the further function of revealing an almost fatal defect in the critical support Weill won from his contemporaries in Germany: despite the many insights, and all the respect and affection that make them possible, there is scarcely any reference to the musical material—to the actual notes and the way they are composed. Moreover, fleeting references to Schubert, Weber, and Mahler, and a solitary (but illuminating) one to Verdi are almost the only acknowledgments that the music has any roots in the past. Thus the case made for Weill as creative musician rested on mere assertions, and was hopelessly vulnerable in that opponents had only to cite the testimony of those of his admirers who had characterized his art as essentially destructive. If there is to be a new approach to

Weill, it could not more profitably differ from the old ones than by starting with strictly musical problems, and remaining close to them.

It is not inappropriate that our thoughts should turn towards Weill at the end of the Schoenberg centenary year, for the polarity between these two men of genius was none the less real because one of them was artistically and intellectually a giant and the other was not. Of the musicians who were in a position to detect that polarity, Adorno was the first to draw attention to it, and the only one to do so in the lifetime of either Weill or Schoenberg. Had Paul Bekker known Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* when he heard what was left of *Der Weg der Verheissung*, his disappointment with Weill's "Dance Round the Golden Calf" would surely have been even more intense; but his understanding of that curiously anodyne piece would not have been enhanced unless he had also looked back to *Mahagonny*, and especially to the second act of that work where the calf is eaten and where the orchestra's dance around the words "Geld macht sinnlich" is modern music's first encounter with modern obscenity—one that is, in its own way, no less exemplary and no less horrifying than its immediate chronological successor in *Moses und Aron* (which Schoenberg began to compose some four months after the premiere of *Mahagonny*).

The speaking of unwelcome truths and the disclosure of disquieting premonitions are as characteristic of Weill at his best as they are of Schoenberg at all times. Schoenberg, without benefit of Marx, and Weill, without benefit of Freud, saw similar things only when they were walking in opposite directions, for Weill was never further from Schoenberg than in the years when he felt closest to him and when Schoenberg responded with a measure of admiration for his talents. The relationship changed and became historically significant at the point where Weill discovered (among other things) a new meaning in his old love of Mahler. The radical deductions he then made from the only pre-revolutionary elements in Mahler which Schoenberg mistrusted—those that exploit what Adorno calls "die Sprengkraft des Unteren"—helped him formulate an antithesis to Schoenberg far more complete and extreme than any that Stravinsky or Hindemith conceived of.

Late Stravinsky has shown us that the antithesis examined in Adorno's *Philosophie der neuen Musik* was resolvable through Webern; but between Schoenberg and Weill no synthesis was or will ever be possible. Linked by their irreconcilable differences no less than by their secret affinities, they are the two hostile consciences of modern music: the anguished father and the disinherited son. Neither looks quite the same without the other. But the future of music in any recognizable form depends, more than many of us may wish to acknowledge, upon the survival of both.

1 For instance, Ernst Schumacher, *Die dramatischen Versuche Bertolt Brechts 1918-1933*, Berlin, 1955; John Willett, *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*, London, 1959; Marianne Kesting, *Bertolt Brecht, Hamburg*, 1959.

2 For instance, Eric Bentley, *Seven Plays by Bertolt Brecht*, New York, 1961, page xxiv.

3 See, John Gutman, "In the Theatre", *Modern Music*, XVI: 1, New York, 1938, page 55.

4 See Samuel L. M. Barlow, "In the Theatre", *Modern Music*, XVIII: 3, New York, 1941, p 192.

5 Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Expositions and Developments*, New York, 1962, p 93.

6 Virgil Thomson, "Most Melodious Tears", *Modern Music*, XI: 1, New York, 1933.

7 Georg Kaiser, quoted by his American agent Paul Gordon in a letter to Weill dated October 27, 1941.

8 Hildegard Brenner, *Die Kunstpolitik des Nationalsozialismus*, Hamburg, 1963, page 167.

9 Walter Abendroth, "Opernideale der Rassen und Völker", *Die Musik*, XXVIII: 6, 1936, page 424.

10 See Walter H. Rubsamen, "Censorship of Opera", *Musical Teachers' National Association Proceedings*, New York, 1941, page 121ff.