Kurt Weill and his critics

By David Drew

The precise point where Weill's and Brecht's paths diverged is not to be found in the works themselves, but rather in the context of Weill's career and personal history. Weill's path is marked—though sometimes a small and misplaced arrow with the legend "Towards the Margin." The vagueness was characteristic of a time when the musical world was not inclined to question the premises of the so-called "Brecht scholars" about the composers (apart from Hindemith) who worked with Weill. The assumptions were twofold: 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 significance."

Such was the trap from which the discovery of Eisler has released us. Notwithstanding mention still lingered in his own right, interest in Weill's career and after the collaboration with Brecht has been significantly increased, and is manifesting itself in the performance and repertory of major works dating from both their 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 in actual fact a stronger and more substantial phenomenon in Weill may not necessarily go; 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 and acquaintances of the man who 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 in the thirties and till the very end of the time of his death. An attempted return to the original position is somewhat fruitless since time and experience have rendered them inaccessible just as surefooted passages have been irreparably rendered them unhabitable. Nevertheless we need, for our own safety, to take account of those positions, and then to plot 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 object of my recent research (Die Dreigroschenoper) (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 Weill's lifetime, and all of which showed extraordinary promise. The final group presented quite another problem. A few years (Weill's lifetime) have not in fact kept Weill an interesting subject who was not also a composer of the time of his death. Whereby, however, justified in remarking that the composer of Die Dreigroschenoper was nowhere near the time of his death 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.

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. As Brecht suggests (in Über Kurt Weill), Weill's various European and American ventures were of a different kind than the "phoney war," the first sketches for the music were made shortly before Weill's death; and the second, in fact, almost immediately after the destruction of Rotterdam; and by the time the score was finished, 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 subconfrontation of Lennon's "Imagine." His command of those processes. A score fashioned with superdub science from nothing is a popular success, and it is an accomplishment of Weill's that has found a popular copy of music and perhaps some of the reaction-formations and localized amnesia characteristic not only of the kind of music of the world and the consumer-society which the (and the dramatist) admires, and of course the composer's own defensive strategies in that year of decision.

If Lady in the Dark is outwardly the least "personal" score, Weill had yet written, inwardly it is the nerve-endings of his musical thinking, in the form of autobiography. After seven years in which—try as he would—he had never quite been able to forget his inalienable links with the kind of music which he had never been born and where his forebears had lived since the fourteenth century, he had now succeeded to 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 Rundkönige and the Spitzköpfe which refrains is:

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

Acceptable but essentially false answers to questions of that sort are given in the play Lady in the Dark, while the unacceptable and true ones are given along with much, much else, far beneath the surface of the music. The wish for anonymity may be one of the layers of the entire score, but fortunately not fulfilled in it, is best understood in the event of a score 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 before Weill's death; and the second, in fact, almost immediately after the destruction of Rotterdam; and by the time the score was finished, the continent of Europe, as weill had known it, was no more.

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and tempo, and so on. It is the basic 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 identify 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 changes in his mature development during the last ten years of his life had been missed at the first and less suppression—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 of salient characteristics of the previous phase.

Musically the pattern defies brief summary, but its other connotations are clear enough. The First Symphony and the Second Symphony which were the first major works 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 a 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 of the deepest sense of that word. Only then, *Lady in the Dark* works the criteria appropriate to the European works (or vice versa). There are only pointlessness. Weill’s attempt to evolve a consistent secondary persona is unique in the history of significant compositions and requires a corresponding and difficult adjustment on the part of everyone who is accustomed to evaluate an artist’s later 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 the kind of adjustment which could have been expected had the emphasis of his “European” impulses been maintained. The imposed standards are those which identify with the America he had now learnt to love—not without difficulty, yet with a boundless sense of gratitude.

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 *Burgzärtle* and *Esra*, 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 teaching, 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 by 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

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that Mahagonny and even Lady in the Dark, is a masterpiece of Verismo-like narrative; and its score, composed for the first time in Paris, is Weill's finest work of orchestral realization to date. In 1931 Der Jasager appeared, and in 1933 Down in the Valley, is not without its charm. The characters and the score and dramatically perfect, is operatic to the bone. From the fact that Americans can accept it by no means is removed from all things German, it proving too the abyss, it is. But the work. Thomson begun in Paris unfortunate. That the was not temporary exposition for the fair to, was Weill. The temporary exhibitions in that sense it was a new model a new medium. It was a solution for Works. The necessary substructure. The necessary assertion was written about • as it was that the very first Leipzig perfor • mance of Der Silbersee was barred. And as they are Schoenberg at all and musicians, in particular, of Marx, and Weill, without benefit of public, were mastery of society. And when they were walking in opposite directions, in a way, they were further from Schoenberg than in Germany, where they had worked and known him and when Schoenberg reserved unimportant publics for the presentation for his talents. The relationship between Schoenberg and Mahler which Schoenberg mis • takes for his public, for those who Adorno calls "the Sprengwerk der Musik", is an antibiotic to Schoenberg far more serious and extreme than any that Stravinsky or the others delighted in before.

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