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Musical Theatre in the Weimar Republic

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THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC was the outcome of the German Revolution of 1918-19, and the consequent abdication of the Kaiser. It was named after the city in which the first post-war parliament assembled. The choice of Goethe's home town was, of course, intended to have symbolic significance. On the one hand it implied a rejection of the Prussian militarist tradition centred on Berlin, while on the other it was a means of indicating a return to the values of German classical humanism. A corollary to this first session of a democratically elected parliament was the foundation in the same city of the great Bauhaus school. At least in theory, a link was established between constitutional and cultural life.

There are certain dangers in symbols of this kind, however. When the situation deteriorates, the symbol is still there to emphasise the fact. Thus it was manifestly symptomatic that before long the government was back in Berlin, and that within four years the Bauhaus had been forced out of Weimar by a reactionary local government. The Weimar Republic was an experiment in importing Western democracy to a country that had no real democratic tradition; and as we know, the experiment ended in disaster.

Nonetheless, the period we have to consider—1920-1933—was one in which the machinery of democracy was to some extent the motive force of the society. It worked only fitfully, and against the most powerful oppositions. Still, it was there, and for all progressive-minded artists it was something to be lovingly protected. For the time being, a shift of interest from man as an individual to man in the mass seemed logical and productive. It is this as much as anything which gives the musical theatre of the time its characteristic formation.

The historical claim of Vienna to be regarded as the forcing-house of the major musical advances in our time has by now been well established. But it is I think only a freak of history that the complementary claims of Germany, and particularly Berlin, have so far been underrated. In Vienna—and here of course I am thinking of the Schoenberg school—the first concern was with the structure and renovation of the musical language. In Germany, the purely musical advance was less significant, for the reason that there was no creative figure of the stature of Schoenberg or even of his two leading disciples. But here, for reasons that are as much social as musical, the main preoccupation of composers was not so much the actual stuff of music, as its application to the musical theatre. And the major achievement of the time was, I believe, the restoration of the musical theatre as a moral institution.

Already we find ourselves at loggerheads with the great legend about artistic life in Weimar Germany—the legend that it was corrupt, dissolute and cynical. Musicians, we are told, deliberately debased the musical currency by mixing it with jazz, while librettists proclaimed and promoted the overthrow of all morality. I call this a legend although in fact it was not by any means a spontaneous phenomenon, but rather a calculated slander spread abroad by the opponents of the new Germany. The real cynicism lay there, rather than with any who can be taken seriously as artists. Unhappily, this slander has long survived its immediate political objective, and is accepted by those who have no inkling of the background. In the process it has been shown to be convertible to very different purposes. The fictitious reality which was once an object of scorn now becomes an object of affectionate nostalgia, and we are presented with a picture of the musical theatre in Weimar Germany which suggests that it is an extension of sophisticated night-life in a last age of rich decadence—Baudelaire, so to speak, translated into *Berlinisch* and doused with Central European *Angst*. Attractive as it may be to some, and repellent as it may be to others, it is in any case a very misleading picture. It would never have arisen if the period had been adequately documented. But 1933 put an end to that, and only now are we beginning to pick up the threads.

First, let us consider who were the accepted masters in music and theatre when the post-war decade began in

Germany. By 'masters' I mean those who were in a position to exert a positive influence on the young. For this reason I would discount Strauss, who was still widely admired but by then relatively isolated, and Pfitzner, whose crude pamphleteering had lost him much of the sympathy he had won in 1917 with his great opera *Palestrina*. At a time when Germany was still discovering the joys of a new liberalism without yet having to face its responsibilities, Pfitzner's fiercely reactionary opinions still struck a jarring note.

For our purposes, it is more profitable to turn to those figures who held important teaching posts. In 1919, the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin was under the directorship of Humperdinck, the composer of *Hänsel und Gretel*. He had only one pupil who later became famous—Kurt Weill—but his influence was negligible, and he retired from the post in 1920. He was succeeded by Franz Schreker.

Schreker, like Scriabin, was one of those highly distinctive but eccentric and flawed late-Romantics whose reputations were virtually annihilated during the inter-war years. It is not impossible that one of these days Schreker will be re-discovered. He was much admired by Schoenberg and Berg, and was certainly a superb musician. His orchestration is masterly, and some of his orchestral works—the suites and the Chamber Symphony—are well worth playing. But he was best known as a theatre composer, and for a long time his reputation rested on his one great success, *Der Ferne Klang*. Today that reputation has dwindled to a few sentences in the textbooks which, with frightening uniformity, tell us something to the effect that his operas were 'chiefly noted for their outspoken eroticism'. The tag bears little examination; even where it has some relevance, it is misleading—and often it has no relevance at all. The point about Schreker's operas is that Wagnerian symbolism and Wagnerian techniques never quite merge with a kind of *verismo* in the D'Albert manner, and the invention, though remarkable in the early stages, is apt to dry up before the end. If all this suggests a typical end-of-the-century artist—Schreker was born in 1878—it should also be said that he was one of the very few of that generation who took an active interest in new developments, and what is more, understood them. This is reflected in his later music, but his æsthetic was hopelessly at odds with the spirit of the time, and

he paid dearly for his refusal to cheat himself into adopting a theatrical style that was foreign to him.

The tributes paid to Schreker's teaching by his pupils, and the effect of it on their work, at least so far as craftsmanship is concerned, are further causes not to dismiss him too lightly. All his pupils at the Hochschule later made some mark in Germany, and one of them, Ernst Křenek, became internationally famous. We shall return to him later.

Schreker was not the only major teacher in Berlin at the beginning of the 1920's. It is typical of the best side of the Weimar republic that Leo Kestenberg, a one-time piano pupil of Busoni's, should have held a high post in the Prussian Ministry. Kestenberg knew of Busoni's long-standing ambition to hold a composition class, and in 1920 persuaded him to settle in Berlin as director of the newly formed Master-Class of Composition at the Academy of Arts. The terms of the contract limited the number of pupils to six, who were to be chosen solely on the grounds of talent—the tuition itself was free. The pupils were duly selected, and just as Křenek emerged to world fame from Schreker's class, so did Kurt Weill from Busoni's. (Weill had spent only one term with Humperdinck.)

During the four years preceding his death in 1924, Busoni's attention was divided between his master-class, a few (only a few) concerts, and above all, the composition of his opera *Doktor Faustus*. For various reasons which I need not go into here, Busoni's influence as a *creative* musician on the younger generation of composers was very slight, though from a purely academic point of view his lessons were well learnt. However, his relevance to our subject today lies in his two mature operas, *Arlecchino* and *Doktor Faustus*. From the theatrical point of view, these works are of decisive importance in the preparation of the type of musical theatre later developed by Weill. In passing, it is also of some interest that Busoni's ideas may have had a slight influence on Alban Berg. Although *Wozzeck* was completed before the publication of *Doktor Faustus*, the two works were composed concurrently, and Berg can hardly have failed to notice that his much-vaunted use of instrumental forms to underline the drama was exactly paralleled by Busoni in his opera. It seems a logical possibility that Berg, who was a great eclectic, realized this unconscious affinity and allowed it to develop consciously. The puppet-play conception

of his opera *Lulu*, and particularly the Animal-Trainer's Prologue, strongly recalls *Doktor Faustus* and its spoken Preface.

In this connection it is also worth suggesting a very possible origin for that favourite *bête noire* of the critics, the film scene in *Lulu*. The film, we remember, shows what happened to Lulu in the two years which elapse between the scenes. Now in 1927, two years before Berg began work on *Lulu*, Erich Kleiber conducted at the Berlin Staatsoper the première of *Royal Palace*, a ballet-opera by Kurt Weill which contains a film interlude showing, just as in *Lulu*, the fortunes of the heroine. The precedent is unmistakable and certainly unique. Whether or not Berg saw *Royal Palace*, he must certainly have known of it through his connection with Kleiber.

But to return to Busoni and his ideas about the musical theatre. He was fundamentally opposed to the realist convention, and incidentally to the emphasis on erotic conflicts. He sought a return to the moralising and ritualistic manner of *The Magic Flute* and an escape from the characteristic pathos of romanticism. (I am of course simplifying ideas which Busoni worked into a complex system.) When he died in 1924, his *Faustus* still uncompleted, the master-class at the Academy of Arts passed to Arnold Schoenberg and thus to a field that for the most part lies outside our enquiry.

So far, we have considered the background provided by the senior generation of musicians. What of the playwrights? The Grand Old Man of German drama was Gerhart Hauptmann. In 1920 he was not in fact so very old—he was fifty-eight—but for some time it had been obvious that artistically he was on the decline. Furthermore he had renounced the socially progressive attitudes of certain of his early plays like *The Weavers*, and had returned to a kind of romantic or historical fantasy that was scarcely germane to the 1920's. Nonetheless we should remember that Berg, after completing *Wozzeck*, had negotiated for one of these plays, the fairy-tale *Und Pippa tanzt!* Anyone less like Lulu than Pippa is hard to imagine.

By general consent the outstanding senior playwright of the post-war era was Georg Kaiser. Today, Kaiser's name is hardly known outside specialist circles, and his plays, which were totally banned in 1933, are still not re-published. Yet he is certainly one of the major dramatists of our time, and for our

purposes he is important because he provided the link between German Expressionism and the musical theatre. So far as Expressionism is known at all in the musical world, it is through the early stage-works of Schoenberg. But Viennese Expressionism has a strong Freudian background that is lacking from German Expressionism, which had its roots in the remarkable group of pacifist writers and artists who gathered in Switzerland during the war years. The purpose of the German Expressionists was liberation in the broadest social and humane sense. It began with pacifism, but had as its larger aim the radical reformation of man and society. The characteristic tone was hectically messianic, and this led in two directions—on the one hand to the idea of a purely ethical and openly religious socialism, and on the other to Marxism. The work of the German Expressionists was from the beginning outspokenly propagandist and activist. It was therefore only natural that artists played an active part, and sometimes even a leading part, in the German revolutions of the immediate post-war years. They went to prison for it, and in one or two cases, even died for it.

After the revolution, the leading Expressionist artists tended to gravitate either to the Bauhaus or to one of several cultural circles in Berlin—notably the November Group, named after the month in which the republic was born. Several musicians were associated with these circles: Hindemith, though no social revolutionary, did some work at the Bauhaus, and Weill, who committed himself to the ethical, non-Marxist side of the revolution from the beginning, was an associate of the November Group.

The revolutionary ideals had an immediate effect on dramatic forms and on language. There was a movement away from the traditional ideas of characterisation and psychological conflict. The emphasis now was on the conflict of social classes rather than of individuals. The question of language, of diction, is also important, for a given style of language is commonly associated with the ideas which it is made to carry, and for the Expressionists the accepted language of the stage was associated with the discredited bourgeois ideals. Therefore we find in Kaiser and certain other writers a calculated attempt to break up the old syntactical structures. Kaiser evolved a 'telegraphic' style which is extraordinarily well suited to musical setting—

indeed, when Boris Blacher set one of his plays two years ago as an opera, he was able to use the original formulations almost exactly as they stood. Bertolt Brecht's use of demotic language was inspired by a similar need to get away from the traditional German—or Prussian—style and imagery.

Before concluding this brief survey of the theatrical background to our subject, I must draw attention to one small but but significant sideline—the *Überdramen*, or surrealist dramas, of Yvan Goll, who wrote the libretto for Weill's *Royal Palace*. Goll came from Alsace, and was a bilingual Franco-German poet who divided his time between Paris and Berlin. He was responsible for introducing to Germany a type of drama that had its origins in Apollinaire—a drama, that is, which avoids any suggestion of the realistic, and achieves the most serious and impassioned ends by means of surrealist farce.

We are now in a position to consider how far these trends affected the young musicians working in the theatres and opera houses during this period. The world has never known, and probably will never know again, a time of such operatic activity. The general desire to kick over the traces which was felt throughout the artistic world led to an extraordinary situation in Germany, where every city worthy of the name had one or more opera houses subsidised by the state and the locality. Such was the spirit of the time that each of these theatres vied with its neighbour to produce new works. At the height of the boom a single season in Germany might offer sixty or seventy premières of new works. Naturally the vast majority of these were ephemeral, but the three composers who were the accepted leaders of the younger generation are still of interest to us today—Hindemith, Weill and Křenek. Of this trio, Křenek was something of an outsider, as he was an Austrian by birth. He had not wished to return to Vienna after his studies with Schreker, but had taken a post at the opera house in Kassel. Hindemith and Weill were generally paired in the public mind, much as we speak of Britten and Tippett.

The relationship of Hindemith and Weill is of some relevance to our study, and as it has not so far been documented, I would like to treat it in some detail. From the moment of their first meeting in the immediate post-war period, Hindemith and Weill indulged in an unusual but friendly game of artistic

rivalry. It began in 1921, when Weill wrote *Die Zaubernacht*, a kind of Christmas ballet-pantomime for children, in the manner of Debussy's *Boîte à joujoux*. The following year, Hindemith wrote 'a Christmas Fairy Tale' entitled *Tutti-fäntchen*. In the same year, Weill began a set of Rilke songs for voice and piano, and Hindemith followed with his *Marienleben*, also to texts by Rilke. Possibly because he disliked the combination of voice and piano, Weill did not finish his cycle at this stage. But three years later he completed the cycle for voice and orchestra. Hindemith did not orchestrate his Rilke songs until 1938. Also in 1922, Hindemith wrote his *Kleine Kammermusik* for wind quintet. Two years later Weill used the accompaniment figure from the third movement of Hindemith's work in a movement of his own Concerto for Violin and Chamber Orchestra. In the next year Hindemith began his series of chamber concertos with a Concerto for Violin and Chamber Orchestra, whose first movement has a theme strikingly like one from Weill's Symphony of 1921. Hindemith's Concerto and Weill's Concerto were both given their first German performance in Weill's home town of Dessau.

The plot thickens. Up to this time, Weill had been known entirely as a composer of orchestral and chamber music; he had written several large orchestral works before Hindemith wrote his first, the Concerto for Orchestra. On the other hand, Hindemith was already well established as a theatre composer, in addition to his fame as a chamber musician. In 1925 Weill's first known opera, *Der Protagonist* had its première at Dresden under Fritz Busch. The opera concerns the problems of an artist and his genius, and it contains two important pantomime scenes. The following year, again at Dresden, Fritz Busch conducted the première of Hindemith's *Cardillac*. The opera concerns, again, the problems of an artist and his genius, but it contains only one important pantomime scene. The decor for the première was by Weill's close friend Raffaello Busoni, the son of his teacher.

In 1927, the Baden-Baden music-festival, of which Hindemith was a director, presented the first German experiments in a kind of chamber opera. Hindemith's sketch, *Hin und Zurück*, and Weill's 'Songspiel', *Mahagonny*, were the prominent events. The year after, the première of Weill's *Berliner Requiem* was conducted by Hindemith's father-in-law.

Finally, in 1929, the four-legged race became a three-legged one. Weill and Hindemith collaborated on a cantata, *Der Lindberghflug*, for which Brecht wrote the text. The two composers set alternative numbers. The partnership sealed, they went on to compose the first examples of school-opera—*Wir bauen eine Stadt* in Hindemith's case, and *Der Jasager* in Weill's. The works were performed within a few days of each other.

Although this chronicle has its comic side, the implication is of serious interest. We see how two very dissimilar composers could be influenced towards each other by their cultural environment. Weill was a born theatre composer, Hindemith, I believe, was not. Yet it was Hindemith who first established the connection with the literary *avant-garde*. (The three operas which Weill wrote before *Der Protagonist* have not survived, but we know that they were on traditional subjects.) The texts of Hindemith's early stage works were all of the Expressionist school. The first, *Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen*, was taken from a play by the Viennese Kokoschka, which incidentally reminds us that at this juncture, Hindemith was still favourably disposed towards the Viennese school, and especially Schoenberg. His other stage works of the time, such as *Sancta Susanna* and *Der Dämon*, were written in collaboration with minor German expressionists, but have nothing in common with the socialist-activist work of that school. Hindemith's last link with Expressionism is to be found in *Cardillac*. Comparison between the original libretto by Ferdinand Lion and the completely revised version made by the composer in 1952 will show that all traces of Expressionism have been removed, to be replaced by something entirely safe and conventional. This conventional streak was already apparent in 1928, when Hindemith chose Marcellus Schiffer, a writer of clever and highly successful commercial revues, to do the libretto of his first and only comic opera, *Neues vom Tage*. *Cardillac* and *Neues vom Tage* are the only large-scale and characteristic works Hindemith wrote for the theatre before 1933. There is much good music in both of them, but nothing, I think, which shows a profound instinct for the theatre, and certainly nothing which can be considered innovatory.

The case of Weill is very different, and something must be said about his first great success in the theatre, *Der Protagonist*, for it was also the first success achieved by any of the young

German composers in this field. The libretto was by Georg Kaiser, which in itself was a remarkable coup for a composer still in his twenties. The last scene of the opera is a good point at which to examine Weill's approach to music drama. The libretto is very much in the Expressionist manner and concerns the leader of a troupe of travelling players in Elizabethan England. The Protagonist is an actor who tries to find through his art the ultimate ecstasy—a Dionysian state in which, like Nietzsche's superman, he will be a law only unto himself. Thus he uses his acting roles as a means of driving out the realities of the world, represented in the opera by his sister and her young lover. While still in the throes of one of his performances, he is accidentally confronted by his sister, and confusing reality with his own dream-world, he stabs her to death. I shall play you the closing pages of the opera, from this point. The actual murder is musically self-explanatory. But note that after the violent death, Weill avoids any suggestion of romantic pathos. A celesta starts ticking like a clock, while various other instruments murmur certain motives from the earlier parts of the opera. There is no singing, and the music remains completely still and unfeeling until the sister's lover enters. Even then there is no threnody. Everything is held in suspense. Then an innkeeper shouts 'Scoundrels, to prison with you', and the Protagonist suddenly awakens, or seems to awaken, from his trance. This is the point to which I wish to draw special attention. The Protagonist's final words are

Go and tell your master to save me from arrest until tonight's performance. He would deprive me of my best role, where there is no longer any distinction between real and feigned madness.¹

Weill does something very characteristic here. Instead of underlining the *human* drama by expressing or imitating the Protagonist's madness, he composes *against* it, and in so doing stresses the absurdity of the idea on which the Protagonist has based his art. So far, the tonality of the opera has been very free, and non-triadic. But in this epilogue the whole harmonic

¹ Geht, und sagt dem Herzog eurem Herrn, er soll mich bis zum Abend der Verfolgung entziehen. Es würde mich um meine beste Rolle bringen, die zwischen echtem und gespieltem Wahnsinn nicht mehr unterscheiden lässt.

force is hurled for the first time on to root-position triads, and the Protagonist's phrases, which hitherto have been subtly parlando, suddenly change to the most blatant *verismo*. In no way is it Weill's intention to parody Italian opera. Nor on the other hand is he expressing or imitating the Protagonist's madness. His sole concern is to condemn the tragic banality of the Protagonist's ideas about art by shifting their emotional background into the foreground.

Here, then, is the whole passage, from the murder to the end of the opera. Incidentally, the fanfares which begin the epilogue are played by the stage orchestra—a wind octet—which has accompanied the two pantomime scenes. The phrases are answered antiphonally by the full orchestra, and then drowned by it, as if to summarise the confusion of the real world and the world of illusion.

(Here was played a recording of the finale of Weill's 'Der Protagonist'.)

Der Protagonist never again had a success equal to that of its first Dresden production. One reason was the extreme difficulty of finding a tenor with the histrionic ability required by the leading role. This situation was, in fact, typical of all Weill's works written for the opera house during this time. He believed that the only hope for new opera as a vital form lay in a complete integration with the methods and dramaturgic standards of the new theatre. It was this which led him in the first place to Kaiser, and then to Yvan Goll, and finally to Kaiser's one-time protégé Bertolt Brecht. But the result was that all the works he wrote with them and others overtaxed the comprehension and techniques of the opera world. For various obvious reasons, the dramaturgic side of opera has always been under-nourished, and lags far, far behind the straight theatre. Correspondingly—both as cause and effect—music criticism in this field has been equally primitive. It is therefore not surprising that the complexities which lie beneath the deceptively simple surface of the dramatic works which Weill wrote in Germany have largely been overlooked. Works which require and amply repay prolonged study have often been dismissed in the opera world as eccentric or trivial or both.

The charge that Weill's theatre works are dated is the most

common of all, and must be answered. Let us approach the question from the other side, by way of a vogue word popular in Germany at the time—*Zeitoper*, or, to use a modern equivalent, 'Committed opera'. Like all such things, *Zeitoper* was a nebulous concept that implied nothing more definite than an obvious external reference to the everyday life of its audiences. The classic of the genre was Křenek's opera *Jonny spielt auf*, produced at Leipzig in 1927. Its success was phenomenal. Within two or three years it had been seen in almost every major opera house of the world.

If it is possible to imagine one of Schreker's librettos brought up to date by Michael Arlen, *circa* 1927, then one has some idea of the style of *Jonny spielt auf*. Externally it has all the modish trappings of the jazz age, but behind them we find the same old sentimental symbols, the same outworn philosophy that had been Schreker's undoing. Nonetheless we should not be too quick to mock the work, for even the most short-lived success in the opera world requires some degree of talent. Unlike Hindemith, Křenek had the Viennese knack of a catchy tune. Furthermore, he had a real, if somewhat coldly intellectual, understanding of the theatre. The libretto of *Jonny*, which he wrote himself, is well constructed in a thoroughly conventional way.

It would be quite wrong to suppose that the work was written with a cynical eye for success. On the contrary, it is almost too painfully a self-confession. I have a feeling that when the history of music in our time comes to be written, Křenek will be seen as its classic victim. A composer of quite exceptional gifts and a thinker of rare intelligence, he could and did write fluently in every style. Neo-classicism, neo-romanticism, the frivolities of *Les Six*, the sobrieties of the Viennese school, and lately the experiments of the post-Webernites—one finds them all in his work. Yet nothing ever quite comes from the musical heart—only from the worried artistic conscience. So it is with *Jonny*. The conflict is there, but not the solution. 'Jonny and his America', writes Křenek,

stood for the fullness of life, optimistic affirmation, freedom from futile speculation, and devotion to the happiness of the moment.²

Accordingly, Jonny the jazz-band player is represented by

² Ernst Křenek, 'Self-Analysis', *New Mexico Quarterly*, xxiii (1953), 16.

optimistic, hedonistic jazz. But this occupies only about a third of the opera. The rest is dominated by two other musical characters. One of them, Daniello, is a violinist, described by Křenek as 'the slick virtuoso', and 'a mean caricature of the dream picture'. But the real counterpart to Jonny is Max, the composer, a 'self-conscious, brooding, introspective, Central European intellectual'. Naturally, Max has self-conscious, brooding, introspective Central European music. Křenek confesses that he intended Max as an autobiographical figure, but the tragedy is that the popular Jonny and the frivolous, *Les-Six*-like Daniello are also part of that autobiography—and they do not mix. Skilful musician though he is, Křenek cannot integrate such disparate elements. Under the stress of foreign jazz conventions, the harmonic terms of reference vacillate with such rapidity that one experiences a kind of aural vertigo. With the exception of the clever little burlesque operetta, *Schwerkewicht*, written in an entirely tonal idiom, one finds this same flaw (to varying degrees) in all of Křenek's works until the early 1930's, when he adopted the 12-tone technique.

Shortly before *Jonny spielt auf*, Křenek had rashly attacked Schoenberg in a public lecture. The master retaliated by including a savage but concealed pun on Křenek's name in the foreword to his *Drei Satiren* op. 28. Shortly afterwards he wrote his one-act opera *Von Heute auf Morgen*, which one can assume was primarily aimed at the follies of *Jonny spielt auf*. Schoenberg criticises the *Zeitoper* convention by pretending to adopt its methods, and then dropping them like a mask. The main characters seem to reflect the happy-go-lucky 'modern' world of Jonny, with its artiness and its easy loves; but in fact the Wife is only pretending to be modern—her assumption of a *Doppelgänger* is a typically Expressionist device in the manner of Kaiser's or Sternheim's comedies. In the end the Wife shows her true colours and the opera ends with this crucial comment on 'modern people':

Their play is produced by fashion, but ours . . . by love.³

Here speaks Schoenberg, the great traditionalist and moralist.

It is, I think, significant that Křenek, who was later to be

³ Regie führt bei ihnen die Mode, bei uns jedoch . . . die Liebe.

reconciled with Schoenberg, was at odds with him at a time when Weill, who never had any such connection, ardently admired and supported the Viennese master from a distance. Weill was indeed one of the very few composers outside the Schoenberg circle who took this stand. Although their two creative temperaments could hardly have been less similar, they had one thing in common: a background of Jewish orthodoxy. This is absolutely fundamental to Weill, and it explains the sharp note of disapproval which enters his music and his writings whenever he turns to 'modern people' in the fashionable sense. His widely misunderstood attitude to jazz has a direct bearing on this. In his own music, jazz is a purely marginal issue, and the jazz-like passages are only used for a critical—that is, a morally critical—purpose, just as the *verismo* flourishes are used at the end of *Der Protagonist*. Unlike most of his colleagues, Weill realised at once that the harmonic conventions on which jazz relies cannot be imported into art-music without risking structural collapse (such as occurs in Křenek's music). There is no jazz harmony in Weill, and only wishful or lazy listening can account for any suggestion to the contrary. Yet the suggestion continues to be made, and several writers have quoted part of a key passage in Weill's only article on jazz, without supplying its crucial continuation. The passage begins as follows:

Jazz appears within a period of increased artistry as a piece of nature, as the most healthy, powerful expression of art which, through its popular origin, immediately became an international folk music having the broadest consequences. Why should art music isolate itself against such an influence?⁴

This is *not* a rhetorical question, for Weill gives the answer in the next sentence, which as far as I can discover has never been quoted before:

It depended on the strength of the individual talents who let themselves be approached by Jazz, whether or not

⁴ Der Jazz erschien mitten in einer Zeit gesteigerter Artistik als ein Stück Natur, als gesundeste, kraftvollste Kunstäußerung, die durch ihren volkstümlichen Ursprung sofort zu einer internationalen Volksmusik von breiter Auswirkung wurde. Warum sollte sich die Kunstmusik gegen einen solchen Einfluss absperren?

Kurt Weill, 'Notiz zum Jazz', *Anbruch*, xl (1929), 138.

they could maintain their position under this influence; and for the serious European musician it was out of the question to imitate American dance music, let alone ennoble it.⁵

Jazz, of this imitative or even would-be ennobled kind, was a corner-stone of *Zeitoper*. Weill was as scornful of the *Zeitoper* idea as Schoenberg, denouncing what he called the 'cheap actuality' of the school and its refusal to come to grips with real moral and social problems. Yet by an evil irony, he, of all the 'Weimar' composers, has been pilloried as an ambassador of corruption and moral bankruptcy. The trouble began with the almost universal misunderstanding of the nature and role of the music in *Die Dreigroschenoper*, and came to a head with the appearance of his opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*. Weill intended *Mahagonny* as a kind of Old Testament allegory, with the strictest moral connotations; but to understand this one must first understand his oblique and highly idiosyncratic methods, and the lack of such an understanding allows even an unbiased observer like Walter H. Rubsamen to declare that the opera is dedicated to the idea that 'living to the hilt without moral fetters of any kind is *justifiable*'. Rubsamen is discussing the history of censorship in opera, and he continues his reference to *Mahagonny* with these words:

After the première there were violent protests, understandable to a certain extent because some of the morbid episodes in the opera were lacking in ethics merely for the sake of cheap sensationalism.⁶

The author barely disguises his opinion that in this case there might be some excuse for the censorship of opera. Unwittingly he adds a seal of approval to the political propaganda that was directed against the work during the last years of the Weimar Republic.

In truth, *Mahagonny* is no less a moral work than, say, *The Rake's Progress*. Unfortunately but somehow fittingly, it appeared at a turning point in the destiny of the Republic. The

⁵ Von der Stärke der einzelnen Begabungen, die den Jazz an sich herankommen liessen, hing es ab, ob sie diesem Einfluss standhielten, und für den ernsthaften europäischen Musiker konnte es nie in Frage kommen, die amerikanische Tanzmusik imitieren oder gar 'veredeln' zu wollen.

⁶ Walter H. Rubsamen, 'Censorship of Opera', *Music Teachers National Association Proceedings* (1941), 121-35.

economic crash of 1929 opened the gates to political extremism, and from then on, the liberal spirit had to fight for its existence. The one great danger of a state-subsidised theatre is that when the state is in danger, the right of theatres to present what they wish is called in question.

Within a few months of the 1929 economic crash, the whole picture of opera in Germany had begun to change. For economic reasons, the repertoire was suddenly flooded with operetta. The same excuse was given for a sharp decrease in productions of new opera, though in fact political forces were at work here. The more progressive composers found their entry to many opera houses barred.

About this time, the Hindemith-Weill-Křenek trio broke up. Křenek's so-called 'Grand Opera', *Leben des Orest*, which was a distinct improvement on *Jonny spielt auf*, had little success. Distressed at the way things were going in Germany, Křenek returned to his native Vienna, where he began work on the most important of all his operas, *Karl V*, which incidentally was the first full-length opera written in the twelve-note technique. Křenek's comment on this work is worth quoting, as it shows how remote he was from the problems which were worrying some of his German colleagues:

I was almost the only musician of international reputation and noteworthy creative power who supported the revival of the tradition of the old, supernational Empire, conceived in the spirit of Catholic Christianity.⁷

In Germany, the idea of Imperialism of any kind was anathema to all progressive musicians. While Křenek was at work on *Karl V*, Weill was writing his most ambitious stage work, the opera *Die Bürgschaft*; and one of its purposes, though not the main one, was to translate into general, quasi-mythical terms, the problems raised by Ghandi's struggle against British rule in India.

However, I am jumping ahead, and we must return to 1930, the year of the first school operas. I shall now consider briefly two important works in this genre, Hindemith's *Wir bauen eine Stadt*—which title, on Britten's analogy, we may translate as 'Let's make a city'—and Weill's *Der Jasager*, the 'Yea-sayer'.

⁷ Ernst Křenek, *op. cit.*, 27.

Hindemith's little work has great charm and a rare simplicity. It has no ideological connotations whatsoever, and may best be described as an application of the Montessori method to children's opera. The children simply set about building a city, and then organising it.

(Here was played a recording of the opening of Hindemith's 'Wir bauen eine Stadt'.)

Weill's *Der Jasager* is a much more ambitious work, and was one of the last great successes in the musical theatre of the Weimar Republic. Leo Kestenberg, whom we have already mentioned in connection with Busoni, was now in charge of musical education in the Kulturministerium. His department adopted *Der Jasager* as, so to speak, a set piece, and it was performed in almost every major state school in Germany—one of the achievements for which Kestenberg was savagely attacked, and finally hounded from his post. The libretto for *Der Jasager* was adopted by Brecht almost literally from a Japanese No-play originally translated by Arthur Waley. In the Japanese play, a boy goes with his friends on a difficult journey across the mountains to fetch medicine for his sick mother. On the way he has an accident which seems likely to impede the whole venture. In accordance with a cruel custom, his comrades throw him from a cliff. In Weill's and Brecht's version this is re-interpreted in a more humane sense. The boy, recognising the responsibilities which he has incurred by joining a group and accepting a common cause, voluntarily agrees to his own sacrifice. The social and/or political implications of this are obvious.

I shall now play the last scene of the work, from the point where the boy says 'Yes'—that is, agrees to his own sacrifice. Like the Hindemith piece we have just heard, this too is a march scene.

(Here was played a recording of the last scene of Weill's 'Der Jasager'.)

One of the many reasons why Weill was unwilling to continue working with Brecht after *Der Jasager* was that he refused to devote his music to specific party-political ends—both because the idea offended his democratic nature, and because he believed that to apply music in this way was to

betray its essential dignity. Immediately after *Der Jasager* Brecht wrote a play which interprets the same theme in strictly political terms: *Die Massnahme*, or 'The Measures Taken'. This I believe to be Brecht's first mature play and his first masterpiece. A master-playwright does not need a composer of genius to help him, and Brecht found the ideal partner for *Die Massnahme* in Hanns Eisler. Like Křenek, Eisler came from Vienna and was (and is) a highly gifted composer. Most of his works have been on a small scale, and he has not written opera. Nonetheless, the conjunction of music and drama in *Die Massnahme* is more consistent and more original than anything Křenek had achieved up to that time. Somewhere between Weill's natural simplicity and Hindemith's technical expertise, Eisler finds an unpretentious but personal style. *Die Massnahme*, and the music he wrote for Brecht's play *Die Mutter* (1931), marks a complete break with the conventions of the romantic and individualistic music-theatre, and, correspondingly, an integration with the working-class amateur choral movement (which had a long and brave history in Germany). In Eisler's case, the attempt to transfer musical expression from the individual to the collective was typically Marxist, but the influence which his choral writing seems to have had on the music of Carl Orff shows that party colours are not the essence of the matter. If Eisler's *Die Massnahme*, and the choral works related to it,⁸ seem more durable (regardless of whether political conditions allow their performance) than much of the music written at that time, it is only because they are composed with scrupulous honesty, and show an unswerving certainty of feeling and direction. In a time of increasing disruption, that certainty was rare.

We are now at the close of an era. The promised first performance of *Die Massnahme* at Hindemith's 1930 Festival of New Music in Berlin was cancelled at the last moment on the ground that such a festival was not a proper place for political propaganda. Later, *Die Massnahme* was the victim of police action, as was *Die Mutter*. The divorce between 'art for art's sake' and 'art for the community's sake' flamed into open

⁸ The a cappella choruses which Eisler wrote in the late 1920's and early 1930's—namely his op. 10, op. 13, op. 14, op. 15, op. 17, op. 19, and op. 21—are among the few important twentieth-century contributions to this genre.

war: a sad outcome of Hindemith's *Gebrauchsmusik* ideal, which had of course left room for argument as to the kinds of *Gebrauch* that were permissible.

As I said earlier, Weill's *Die Bürgschaft* was the last progressive opera staged in a German state theatre before Hitler. It was produced by Carl Ebert at the Berlin Staatsoper in 1932. Several other opera houses were contracted to perform it, but with only two exceptions, hastily changed their plans. The work was announced for revival in the following Berlin season, but the revival never took place: and when Ebert was dismissed from his post at the Staatsoper, his 'politically subversive' production of *Die Bürgschaft* was given as one of the reasons.

In fact the work is founded on a fable by Herder, one of the great classical humanists, and is about the idea of social justice. In this respect it can well stand for the best aspirations of the Weimar theatre. It reflects the two major operatic revivals of the time—the Verdi renaissance and the Handel renaissance. It reflects the experience of Expressionism, with its fluid character-definition and its almost cubist structures. Above all it reflects the move away from individual characterisation and towards the examination of humanity in the mass.

(Here was played a recording from Kurt Weill's 'Die Bürgschaft'.)

In 1935, the late Alfred Einstein ended an article on *Die Dreigroschenoper* with these words:

(*Die Dreigroschenoper*) constituted the beginning of a new type of opera as yet unknown in England, which might have led to a resuscitation of the traditional and obsolete form: an opera which in subject matter and treatment would appeal to the masses, which was simple and effective, which was based on the *Lied*, and which produced its first serious example in Kurt Weill's *Bürgschaft*. This development has now been abruptly ended, but some day it may resume.⁹

Einstein's faith in the validity of these works was not shared by many thirty years ago but today it begins to look prophetic.

⁹ Alfred Einstein, 'A German Version of "The Beggar's Opera"', *The Radio Times* (February 1, 1935), 13. (N.B. I have slightly altered the punctuation and grammar of the above passage, as it seems to have been unclearly translated from the German.)

There is more at stake than the possibility of resuming a development, however. In the case of Hindemith and Křenek the development was never broken. Both composers have continued to work on the lines they had established in Weimar Germany. Hindemith has not had, and perhaps could not have, any obvious successor as a theatre composer; but what one might call the Křenek tradition is continued today in Germany not only by Křenek himself but also by Wolfgang Fortner, Hans-Werner Henze, and Giselher Klebe.

What then can we learn from our study of the musical theatre in this period? First, of course, the lesson familiar from our study of most periods, namely that although numerous composers were at work, and a great deal of music was written, very few of the composers and very little of the music can bear revival. But from the ephemeral figures characteristic of the time there is a second lesson to be learnt. The 1920's, like our own decade, was a time in which artists of modest ability were impelled by certain cultural and social tensions to attempt a kind of 'revolutionary' art that was beyond their reach. If we examine a work like Max Brand's *Maschinist Hopkins* (1929), which is a typical advanced opera of the period and which for a year or two enjoyed sensational success, we find a type of promiscuous modernism which is also typical of our own day (see for instance Blomdahl's *Aniara*, or even Luigi Nono's *Intolleranza 1960*). In *Maschinist Hopkins*, the most up-to-date methods of stage-craft were jumbled together with almost every compositional technique of the time, from popular song to *Sprechstimme* and near-atonality. Aesthetically the result is a kind of chaos which may for a short time be mistaken for real innovation. Today, it is almost as important to learn from that mistake as it is to assess the true worth of what was attempted or achieved by Hindemith, Weill, Křenek, and Eisler.