



## THE KURT WEILL FOUNDATION FOR MUSIC

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### Sensational Discovery of Unknown Kurt Weill Song

*A previously unknown song turns up in the archive at Freie Universität Berlin.*

**NEW YORK (October 31, 2017).** In a remarkable find, a previously unknown composition by Kurt Weill was recently discovered in a Berlin archive. The three-page manuscript in the composer's hand bears the peculiar title "Lied vom weißen Käse" ("Song of the White Cheese," lyric by Günther Weisenborn). Weill composed it for his wife, the singer-actress Lotte Lenya, for performance in a political revue produced to benefit unemployed actors of the Berlin Volksbühne in November 1931. Other prominent contributors to this revue included Bertolt Brecht, Hanns Eisler, and Friedrich Hollaender. In the 1960s, Lenya made an attempt to find the song, which she remembered under the title "Song of the blind maiden." When her search yielded no results, she lamented the loss of the music: "Nowhere to be found. Probably buried in some basement." According to Foundation President Kim Kowalke, this vintage, politically engaged song dating from the apex of Weill's career in Germany, will soon be published and recorded.

"Although the discovery is small in terms of the song's length, it is truly sensational," commented musicologist Elmar Juchem, Managing Editor of the Kurt Weill Edition, who was able to identify Weill's manuscript while conducting archival work in Berlin. "Nobody believed that something completely unknown by Weill could still surface, let alone from his Berlin heyday." Juchem came across the song in the archives of the department of theater studies at the Freie Universität Berlin. While examining documents related to Weill's music for the play *Happy End* (1929), he inquired whether the university held any other Weill-related materials. Archivist Peter Jammerthal pulled a number of programs, photos, and press clippings, and then retrieved the hitherto unidentified music manuscript. The neatly written holograph score resides among the papers of a relatively obscure actress named Gerda Schaefer, whose documents came to the Freie Universität several years ago. Schaefer was an ensemble member of the Volksbühne in the early 1930s.

The song, sung by the character of a blind girl, tells of an evangelical preacher's unsuccessful attempt to heal her with "white cheese." The lyric refers to Joseph Weißenberg (1855–1941), a well-known faith healer in Berlin during the Weimar Republic, whose preferred method of healing was "cottage cheese and two Our-Fathers." In the composition, Weill interpolates phrases from the popular Lutheran chorale "So nimm denn meine Hände" ("Lord, Take My Hand and Lead Me"), to grotesque and comical effect. The song ends with the girl speculating that perhaps it wouldn't be so bad if everybody were blind, so that nobody would have to see "what's currently going on in this world." At the time of the composition, the world had begun to

feel the Great Depression and Germany's political situation had taken a sharp turn for the worse. A new series appearing on German cable TV (and soon to be released on Netflix), *Babylon Berlin*, depicts this very time in Germany's history. The show features Weill's music in at least one episode, including a reenactment of the original production of *Die Dreigroschenoper* from 1928. Then as now, Weill's music indelibly captures the sonic world of the Weimar period and remains an iconic representation of that era.

Chronologically speaking, the newly discovered song belongs to the phase of Weill's career when he had just concluded the composition of his grand opera *Die Bürgschaft* ("The Pledge"), which would receive its world premiere in Berlin in March 1932. At the same time, Weill was frantically preparing a production of his opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* for another Berlin stage in December 1931. In the years between 1927 and 1931, Weill composed incidental music for a number of productions written or staged by Lion Feuchtwanger, Bertolt Brecht, Arnolt Bronnen, and Erwin Piscator.

## **ABOUT KURT WEILL**

Kurt Weill (1900-1950) is best known as the composer of *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). Following the rise of the Nazis, he emigrated to France in 1933, and then to the United States in 1935, where he made a career composing Broadway musicals, and was a key influence on the works of Leonard Bernstein, John Kander and Fred Ebb, and Stephen Sondheim.

A three-volume critical edition of one of his central works, *Lady in the Dark* (1940, book by Moss Hart, music and lyrics by Ira Gershwin and Weill), will be published in November. On 9 December, the German-language premiere of Weill's *Love Life* (1948, book by Alan Jay Lerner, lyrics and music by Lerner and Weill) takes place at Theater Freiburg.

## **ABOUT THE KURT WEILL FOUNDATION**

The Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, Inc. (<http://www.kwf.org>) is dedicated to promoting understanding of the life and works of composer Kurt Weill (1900–1950) and preserving the legacies of Weill and his wife, actress-singer Lotte Lenya (1898–1981). The Foundation administers the Weill-Lenya Research Center, a Grant Program, the Kurt Weill Book Prize and the Lotte Lenya Competition, and publishes the Kurt Weill Edition and the Kurt Weill Newsletter.

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