

Die goldenen Zwanziger

Berlin, February 2021

"Berlin im Licht," a festival comprising stage and concert works planned by the Komische Oper, Berliner Ensemble and Berlin Philharmonic for February 2021, fell victim to the pandemic. Yet a number of concerts survived under the title "The Golden Twenties," streamed from the Philharmonie Berlin without audiences on the Philharmonic's Digital Concert Hall platform. Weill's instrumental music formed the core of each of four programs.

13 February 2021, Berlin Philharmonic

The opening concert featured Weill's *Symphonie in einem Satz* (Symphony No. 1) and marked the first performance of the new critical edition prepared by James Holmes. Presumed lost after 1933, Weill's manuscript surfaced only after his death. The first performance took place in Hamburg in 1958; David Drew's published score followed in 1968. Composed in 1921, the symphony functions mainly as a tone poem; Weill noted an extra-musical impulse for the work, Johannes R. Becher's play *Arbeiter, Bauern, Soldaten*. Not coincidentally, it shows the strong influence of Strauss, Mahler, and Schreker in terms of form and handling of compositional material, though Weill departs from the high-Romantic model by basing the harmony primarily on intervallic fourths, lifted presumably from Schoenberg's music of 1908–18. It also contains much chromatic figuration and an exceptional amount of counterpoint and thematic invention and development. Technically adept and equal to the work of any of his peers, the symphony shows Weill attempting to master the musical language of his time. He soon moved away from it, however, so the work remains a curious amalgam of late-nineteenth century declamatory style and cooler musical ideas in line with the developing post-war esthetic and mood.

The main performing challenges lie in the tempos and clarification of the somewhat diffuse orchestration and textures. The work bears extensive tempo indications (*Sehr Breit* [very broad], *Schneller* [faster], *Allegro Vivace*, etc.) and many headings of an Expressionist type (*Feierlich* [solemnly], *Aufrauschend* [rushing, as water or wind], *Sehr Zuversichtlich* [confidently], *Auflebend* [coming back to life], *Mystisch* [mysterious]). The exact significance of those as well as certain indications of dynamics and bowing is not entirely clear. (Notably, Weill never heard the work performed except in a four-hands piano transcription prepared for his composition class with Busoni.) Conductor Kirill Petrenko laid down very well-chosen tempos for the introduction and four primary sections and masterfully graded the speeds through the many connecting passages and interludes. Admirably flexible and responsive to changes of character and mood, his reading created a wholly convincing trajectory through the work's 25-minute span. The monumental opening rang with gravitas, the *Ländler*-like section, reached with a perfectly judged transition, was buoyant, and Petrenko maintained the flow through the long *Andante Religioso*, in which he wisely avoided subdividing the beat. Per-



PHOTO: MONIKA RITTERSHAUS

haps only the *Larghetto* fugal section was a little too brisk, which made the following *Chorale* seem rather lightweight.

Conductor and players artfully balanced the orchestration throughout, so the wild, agitated *Allegro* sections were sharply focused and the Mahleresque flourishes clear and distinctive. One deficiency: staccato articulation and accents demanded in the score were sometimes missing. The Berlin Philharmonic tends to sleekness and rounded tone at all times, even when the score calls for melodic angularity and short, snappy articulation, both strongly characteristic of post-World War I new music. Nonetheless, Petrenko and the orchestra gave a cogent and impressive performance of a too-rarely performed work.

20 February 2021, Berlin Philharmonic

The concert suite from *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, a late substitution in a program originally intended to feature *Die sieben Todsünden* and *Das Berliner Requiem*, juxtaposes a series of closed numbers from the opera without linking passages. Conductor Wilhelm Brückner-Rüggeberg assembled it in 1968, a decade or so after he recorded four of Weill's theater works with Lotte Lenya (including *Aufstieg*). Although not much remembered now, he served as assistant and *répétiteur* to Hans Knappertsbusch in the 1930s and went on to a successful career, making many recordings in an impressive breadth of repertoire. He eventually settled in Hamburg where he was also a revered teacher until his death in 1985.

The Philharmonic's performance under Thomas Søndergård (a late replacement for Donald Runnicles) came across as too plush and smooth, unfortunately. The discordant angularity and jagged, propulsive rhythms were all ironed out, and the orchestra simply failed to play any of the staccato and accent markings in the score. The solo saxophone got in a few expressively yearning melodic lines, but the trumpet had no bite and the solo trombone mustered no sense of phrasing—each note weighted exactly the same as every other—while the strings played with a thick, inexpressive vibrato. At least one movement sounded very sentimental, a quality utterly foreign to Weill. The final movement lacked any convincing build-up to its thunderous close, leaving the climax insufficient and the surface of the music unruffled. It was a luxurious rendering that betrayed the spirit of the work.

(continued on next page)

23 February 2021, members of the Berlin Philharmonic

Billed as “A Night at the Moka Efti” after the famous Berlin cafe/nightclub of the 1920s, this selection of jazz- and popular dance-influenced music presented a successful contrast. The *Suite pan-améenne* (four numbers composed for *Marie galante*) stood out as a highlight of these four concerts: the players appeared unleashed and, urged on by conductor Michael Hasel, responded with brash energy and a bouncy, rhythmic swing. The raucousness was exhilarating, the dance energy captivating, and all the tempos beautifully judged. The woodwinds had flair, the trombone soloist worked in some terrifically catchy phrasing, and the ensemble brought a lovely burnished tone to the “Tango habanera” (the original version of the “Youkali” tango).

Singer and noted cabaret actress Dagmar Manzel led an earthy rendition of “Berlin im Licht” to open the concert, and it was a delight to hear the much-underrated Mátyás Seiber’s *Two Jazzolettes* and Stefan Wolpe’s *Suite from the Twenties*, both based on contemporary popular dance forms and wrapped in gritty, modernist compositional techniques.

It takes real courage to stick closely to Weill’s seemingly slow metronome indications in the *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik*, but it offers room for phrasing the intentionally languid melodic lines and catching the rhythmic swing in Weill’s subtle syncopations.



PHOTO: PETER ADAMIK

This performance, as so many others, had very fast tempos (save in the “Anstatt daß-Song” and the “Ballade vom angenehmen Leben”) and thus trivialized the music, rendering it under-characterized and leaving the parody Baroque elements unmarked. The players slipped back into smooth and unaccented articulation, making it all much too mild and reverent; the finale went by with little impact.

16 February 2021, Karajan Academy

The student orchestra from the Karajan Academy (affiliated with the Berlin Philharmonic) performed two of Weill’s major works alongside Eisler’s music from the film *Kuhle Wampe*. The Symphony No. 2 dates from around the same time as *Die sieben Todsünden*, with which it shares several musical motives and a preoccupation with dance rhythms. Weill is not generally considered a dance-music composer, but most of his songs have a strong underlying dance rhythm and feature a wide array of idi-

oms: tangos, foxtrots and other two-step numbers, waltzes, even the Charleston and the “blues” which German composers took to be a slowish dance. Obviously prominent in his theater works, it forms the basis for much of his instrumental music as well.

Unfortunately, the Academy’s response was pedestrian. The variety and gesture of the rhythmic motion mostly came across as indistinct. The lead motive of the second movement was not played accurately even once, and Weill’s characteristic quick dotted-rhythm counterpoints lacked sharpness. Conductor Marie Jacquot chose not to subdivide in several slow-moving sections, so strongly etched rhythmic motion simply mushed together, while at other moments tempos sagged or rushed or lurched about. Staccato articulation and accents were mostly ignored, dynamics went largely unobserved, and the timbre and tone quality did not hold any interest, so that little sense of dance motion or energy emerged.

In the Violin Concerto, soloist Kolja Blacher exerted a commanding presence in the first movement and rendered the stratospheric solo passages with wonderful accuracy. However, the second movement, a series of charming but quirky dances, suffered from bowstrokes pulled much too hard, making it all rather brusque. The Serenata was lugubrious and neither he nor the conductor solved the problem of moving gracefully from one episode to another. The tarantella-like final movement began too fast and scrambled incoherently to the end; the short, mysterious, pulsating interlude lacked vivacity and gestural strength. The wind orchestra accompaniment needed more color throughout and the overall impression was one of bland technical proficiency. Inexplicably, the orchestra deployed only two double basses, where Weill’s score specifies four. This suggests considerable negligence in artistic management that arguably extends to the unwise decision to allow a student training orchestra to be so exposed on an important worldwide streaming platform.

Each broadcast carried spoken introductions (a mix of English and German, credited to Oliver Hilmes) and intermission features of varying quality. The camera work, credited to Hannah Dorn, was exemplary, with an excellent balance of shot continuity leading from one or more of the featured players to another and avoiding distractions such as frequent cutting or too tight a focus within the picture frame. The sound quality will depend on the listener’s home equipment, though there is no substitute for being in a concert hall with the performers. I listened on an average computer set-up, and the sound was generally impressive, although low-frequency details in several passages did not come through.

Mixed results, then. Definitely some characterful performances, and it’s always good to hear rarely programmed concert works by Weill, but too much of the playing lacked style or strong characterization. On this evidence, one would struggle to understand why these works were new and exciting in their time—so modern, in fact—and what they might mean to us today.

Philip Headlam
Berlin

Lotte Lenya: Warum bin ich nicht froh?

Documentary directed by Katja Duregger

Premiere: 14 March 2021 on ARTE (Europe)

A new documentary film about Lotte Lenya: what a splendid idea! Her life and accomplishments coincide with striking innovations in literature, music, and their sister arts; she herself was a contributor to or perceptive observer of many of these breakthroughs. As excerpts from her interviews demonstrate, she conveyed her unique and much-needed perspective not in the terminology of a cultural historian but from the point of view of the working class. Her superb mind and unerring instinct shone forth every time she brought that perspective to her audience. In telling Lenya's story, the film also brings a big slice of twentieth-century cultural history to life.

Not that the film slights her stature as a performer by any means. One of the chief merits of the documentary is that it serves up an abundance of that amazing singing voice again—not only music with which Lenya was intimately associated, such as “Seeräuberjenny” (German and English!) or *Die sieben Todsünden*, but also material not normally part of her repertoire, such as “September Song” or “Speak Low.” Beyond those welcome reminders, the film treats us to other star turns, exemplified by Kander and Ebb's Broadway hit *Cabaret* in which Lenya appeared for several years in the major role of Fräulein Schneider. In the twenties and thirties her untrained voice sounded, in Ernst Bloch's words, “sweet, high, light, dangerous, cool, with the radiance of a crescent moon.” After 1950, her voice was deeper and rougher but richer in some ways; the film presents examples of both so we can appreciate the differences. Her speaking voice comes through in video clips of interviews from the 1950s through the 1970s, so we hear bits of her story in her own words.

The film also profits from a wide range of still photos and film clips. Some show Lenya with fellow artists, such as Louis Armstrong and his band; some highlight her song interpretations. Last but not least, these pictorial additions remind us of the beauty of Paris, Berlin, London, and New York, where most of the action takes place.

The director chose wisely in tapping Pamela Katz and Kim H. Kowalke as expert commentators. Katz, who has written two books on Lenya, offers insight into her performing persona. She makes the point that performing suited her individual psychology because it creates a relationship with the audience that is intimate and distant at the same time. Even more interesting is her contention that Lenya's impoverished upbringing made her an ideal interpreter of Weill and Brecht's songs about down-and-out characters. Kowalke, president of the Kurt Weill Foundation and renowned scholar of forty years' standing, explores Lenya's rise to prominence after Weill's death in 1950—when her performing career became the means of fulfilling her self-imposed task of perpetuating his music—and provides a sensitive account of their complicated and mutually dependent relationship. He points out that Weill forgave Lenya her extramarital affairs, saying that he was a “good Jewish boy, and [they] always forgive.” That couldn't have been easy after her “year of intemperance,” as she dubbed it, when she gambled away Weill's savings together with her boyfriend Otto Pasetti. Kowalke's role as editor of Weill and Lenya's correspondence has prepared him well to deliver a thorough account of Weill's feelings about Lenya; his discussion of Weill's charming pet names for her, borrowed from delicate flowers or plants, makes for subtle and revealing commentary.

The film does not always steer clear of technical flaws and questionable decisions about content. As to the former, superimposing a voiceover German translation onto statements made by English-speaking respondents makes the words harder to understand in two languages. As for content, the documentary has some notable gaps. For example, apart from a brief reference to *From Russia with Love*, it sets aside Lenya's short but exceptional filmography, even her Academy Award nomination for *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*. (Her only appearance in one of Weill's Broadway shows, as the Duchess in *The Firebrand of Florence*, also passes unremarked.)

More generally: It was, to my mind, a mistake to allocate a dual role to the German actress and singer Meret Becker, who is billed as “singer, actress, Weill-interpreter.” She acts both as a commentator on Lenya's life and achievement and as her impersonator (which makes her a “Lenya-interpreter” as well), leaving the audience in doubt about her role at any moment. She does not lack enthusiasm, but Becker fails to capture Lenya's wide variety of emotional tone.

Yet the documentary is much-needed and has many strengths. Even its shortcomings may serve as an inspiration to this or another filmmaker to produce a sequel.

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Title frame from Duregger's film

Die Dreigroschenoper (film)

**Film by Catharina Kleber, in the
"Wahnsinnswerke" series**

Premiere: 27 February 2021 on 3sat

Available for streaming: <https://www.3sat.de/kultur/theater-und-tanz/wahnsinnswerke-dreigroschenoper-100.html>

It was Dorothy Parker who long ago invented a category for books that need not take up the prospective reader's time: "Yet Another Book to Cross Off Your List." This by turns bloated and trivialized survey of a range of German productions of *Die Dreigroschenoper* offers—unintentionally, of course—vindication of Parker's wisdom. We are informed in the publicity for the documentary series that "The classics of the theatre are 'hochaktuell'" (a *de rigueur* buzzword meaning "very timely"), and that the series "celebrates their timelessness." This collage of images and moments randomly selected from productions across six decades is a blissfully self-satisfied demonstration of the interconnection of these apparently contradictory and essentially meaningless categories.

We are hit immediately with a montage of images from various productions—a crowd in caps, white T-shirts, and work clothes; a blonde descending from an airplane in a white wedding dress with “I Love You” emblazoned in red across the skirt; a gallery of semi-nude men and women who resemble nothing so much as escapees from a bad S&M film—that plunges us into a world of ... I’m really not sure. With the assistance of a brief introduction and some on-screen titles—e.g., “Bürgertum”; “Moral”; “Frauenbild” (citizenship, morality, images of women)—the alert viewer can tie these scenes to the work under discussion. But lest there be any confusion, the montage comes to a close with another blonde in close-up delivering the revelatory lines “Das war Mackie Messer!” (That was Mack the Knife!) with a snarling yet enthusiastic smile.

After that opening the tone becomes slightly less overheated. We are treated to a collection of insights into the work from a gaggle of po-mo, pre-mo, and faux-mo pontificators: director Antú Romero Nunes; performer Meike Droste; actor/singer Campino; director of the Berliner Ensemble Oliver Reese, who provides a voice of reason; and self-described “writer against the system” Fatima Moumouni. These to all appearances casually selected guides cover a wide and unconnected array of points. We learn that the work is “multi-layered”; that Macheath is an opportunist; that the work shows us what can happen to tyrants; that the lives of Macheath and Tiger Brown go in two different directions after their shared golden days in India; and that their big duet is a protest against the madness of war.

So far not much mention of Kurt Weill and his non-negligible contribution to the success of the work. But we do hear from Campino—who played Macheath in the Klaus Maria Brandauer production (Berlin, 2006)—seated beside what looks like a dis-



used railway line with no destination in sight. If that weren't enough, we are treated to a number by his band Die Toten Hosen, three chords augmented by massed strings and heavy percussion (yes, Dorothy Parker came to mind again).

In fairness, there are intelligent segments in the documentary, such as still images from Erich Engel's remounting of his original 1928 production of the work for the Berliner Ensemble, which featured Wolf Kaiser as an unforgettable Macheath. This production, in fact, was my very first encounter with *Die Dreigroschenoper*, on tour in London in 1965. Whenever Kaiser was onstage, the whole production took off. I shall never forget his performance of the "Tango-Ballade"—languid yet electrifying, the *Gestus* of his character in the scene brilliantly captured in one touch: one hand kept in his jacket pocket throughout the dance with Jenny. Another worthy choice: Dieter Giesing's 1972 Hamburg production, as smart and deft as I remembered it to be, with clever allusions to 1920s American gangsters (not as clichéd then as now); a fine and elegantly satirical Peachum; a lightly yet intelligently characterized Macheath.

Alas, there's little else that measures up in a bewildering succession of "significant moments." The hideous version of the "Kanonen-Song" from the Brandauer production, with Macheath and Brown snarling and spitting at each other and the audience? The Thalia take on the work (Hamburg, 1994) which features *all* the characters as Brecht lookalikes, with the stage directions read aloud? (This sort of thing could have legs. What about a production of *The Wild Duck* with all the characters playing Ibsen? Or *Saint Joan* with everybody as Shaw? Joan might look good in a beard ...) Even a preview of the forthcoming Berliner Ensemble production, with its elaborate scaffolding set illuminated with large letters that read "Be Amazing"?

Even the closing disappoints, with anticlimactic, not to say trivial, insights: the work remains "ein deutscher Exportschlager" with "immer etwas zu entdecken" (a profitable German export in which there is always something new to discover). The film is part of a series titled "Wahnsinnswerke," which might be translated "works of wonder," but which read literally means "works of madness." While this rendering meshes perfectly with *Hamlet*, another entry in the series, this ill-conceived guide to *Die Dreigroschenoper* doesn't fit under either heading.

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