

Weill: Symphony no. 2 Shostakovich: Symphony no. 5

**Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra;
Lahav Shani, conductor**

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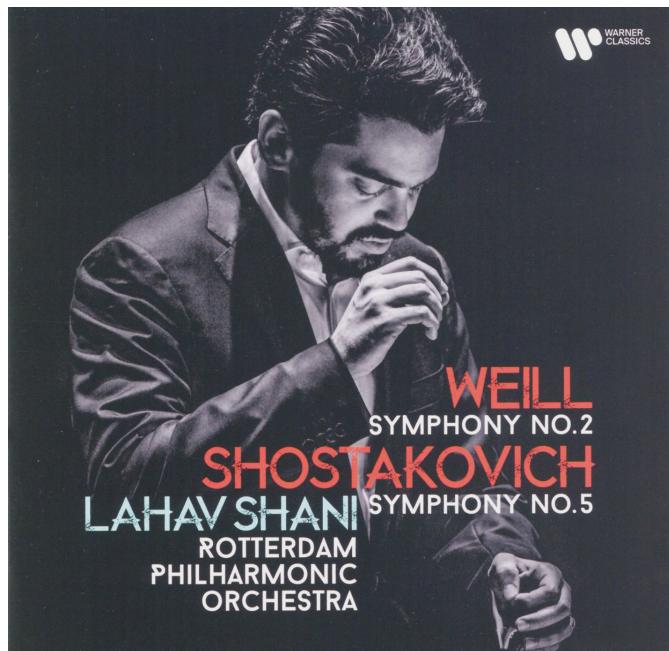
Weill: Violin Concerto; Symphony no. 2

**Tamás Kocsis, violin; Ulster Orchestra;
Jac van Steen, conductor**

SOMM Recordings SOMMCD 280

Two superb new recordings of Kurt Weill's *Fantaisie symphonique* (Symphony no. 2) make for powerful reminders of its unique place in the music of its time. In European music, the period between the two world wars is habitually linked with neoclassicism; Weill's symphony tests our understanding of the term. Following the outlines of sonata form in its first movement, the symphony differs from many of its contemporaries by avoiding allusions to eighteenth-century styles, whether baroque or classical. Scored for a modest orchestra of paired winds, timpani, and strings (one trombone smaller than Mozart's ensemble in *Die Zauberflöte*), it doesn't go back to Bach, Pergolesi, Haydn or anyone else and never sounds anything like an eighteenth-century ensemble. The work feels entirely of its fateful time, 1933–34, and is "classical" only in its clarity and concision and in its avoidance of exotic colors or eccentric shock effects. For this, his final symphonic composition, Weill distilled the idioms and emotional content of two great theatrical works written just before and just after he left Germany, *Die Bürgschaft* and *Die sieben Todsünden*, into a purely musical form that speaks directly to the listener.

New recordings offer the possibility of new perspectives on familiar pieces, especially when complemented by unexpected works. One of my favorite older recordings of Weill's symphony, conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin, found an unexpected, enlightening kinship between Weill's score and Nino Rota's music for *La Strada*. The different pairings on the two new recordings illuminate Weill's score in contrasting ways. By placing the *Fantaisie symphonique* shoulder to shoulder with Shostakovich's Fifth, a work whose response to history has been acclaimed and debated ever since its premiere in 1937, Lahav Shani affirms the weightiness of Weill's score, which lay forgotten for decades while the Shostakovich became standard repertory. Shani and



the Rotterdam Philharmonic do more than merely justify this perspective with an impassioned performance that reveals the dramatic urgency of every phrase. The contrasting contexts of the two symphonies, one written by an exile in flight, beginning a new life, the other by an apparently penitent rebel returning to the fold (or so we thought), challenge us to think anew about the relations between music and politics and the ways that music bears witness to history. Both symphonies end with triumphant-sounding marches. Do we take them at face value? The pairing also invites the listener to reconsider the varied influence Mahler had on composers as different as Berg, Webern, Shostakovich, Weill, Britten, Copland, and Bernstein. The trumpet solo soon after the start of Weill's symphony is a Mahlerian gesture, as is the funeral procession of the second movement. In Shani's equally fresh reading of the Shostakovich, the scherzo sounds like it was dictated by Mahler down to its smallest details. Mahler's mortality-haunted songs and symphonies spoke with renewed force to the 1930s.

Pairing the symphony with the violin concerto written a decade earlier, the SOMM recording forces the listener to focus on Weill's artistic development. Composed just after Weill completed his studies with Busoni, the concerto displays a youthful genius exploding with original ideas, but also in possession of all the technical competence needed to give them cohesive form. The ensemble comprising winds, percussion, and double basses immediately sets the music apart from its predecessors, bringing the cabaret or dance hall into the concert hall, and its five-part formal outline is also entirely new. The music, while brilliant, is never merely brash; the first movement, with its slogging ostinato, military percussion, and repeated soundings of the *Dies Irae*, places us on the remains of a grim battleground, a soldier's tale far darker than Stravinsky's Faustian fable. The musical idiom is post-tonal, chromatic, and dissonant, yet doesn't sound like Schoenberg or Stravinsky. Every moment of the concerto engages the listener, yet its unceasing inventiveness can make it challenging to attain and retain a grasp of the whole. On first hearing, it may not "stick" with the listener, mainly due to its avoidance of repeated passages. On repeated listening the very elusiveness of the music becomes its charm.

By the time Weill composed his second symphony, nearly a decade later, his idiom had become much more disciplined, economical, and precise—every note hits its target, and, on closer study, the thematic coherence of all three movements even suggests comparison with Brahms (though only in that regard; the musical style is vastly different). Greater coherence, and much improved “stickiness,” also come from a sophisticated renewal of tonal harmony, and tonal melody, closely related to Weill’s works for music theater. The harmonic idiom connects to the popular style of *The Threepenny Opera*, but at the same time it resembles the “progressive” harmonies of Mahler, or Schoenberg’s “roving harmonies,” constantly in motion. We might counter the impulse to contrast impetuous youth and mature master (still in his early thirties) by noting the distinctive expressive terrain that the works share: a tragicomic poignancy, present in the very first notes in the concerto, and in every measure of the symphony.

The challenge for performers of the violin concerto is making its novel formal design dramatically convincing without obscuring the quirky delights of its details. While Kocsis and the Ulster Orchestra play beautifully, I felt they were ironing out the eccentricities of the score, “normalizing” the concerto to make it sound more like a virtuoso vehicle. It is instructive to compare the very first recording, with soloist Anahid Ajemian and conductor Izler Solomon, which reveals many more colors and moods in the music, particularly in the first movement. Kocsis is less varied in expression than Ajemian, and Jac van Steen’s approach is more bleakly monochromatic than Solomon’s, but both artists spring back in the central movement, where two dance scenes frame a cadenza which takes the unusual form of a dialogue between violin and trumpet. Like so many of the events in this concerto, including an extended dramatic episode at the center of the first movement where the soloist just stands by and listens, this unexpected void is an intriguing clue to a mystery that remains unsolved and therefore all the more intriguing.

The outer movements of the Second Symphony unfold cinematically, as rapidly paced emotional panoramas with fleeting and contrasting moments of panic, anxiety, nostalgia, mourning, resistance, resilience, mockery, hope, and despair. Small interpretive choices of tempo inflection and textural balance can change

the way we hear the interplay of feelings. I found that both of these recordings revealed nuances of expression that I had not heard before, moments of greater tension, pathos, or even humor. The way each conductor chooses to interpret Weill’s very occasional calls for tempo changes gives the music a different spin—particularly at the passages marked “*Un poco tenuto*” in the middle of the first movement’s development section, and “*Un poco meno mosso*” in the recapitulation (both markings give the conductor considerable leeway) where the music seems on the verge of exhaustion before recovering its sense of purpose. In Shani’s reading, the extended slower section of the recapitulation becomes the heart of the entire movement, especially in its final phrase, where the solo oboe seems to bid farewell to a past life which will never return. The central Largo, slow and funeral throughout, seems to begin as a public ceremony, with ritualized pomp and stiffness, but then moves into more intimate, private, and lonely spaces. Both recordings reminded me of the Jewish tradition of “sitting shiva,” a week-long gathering at a house of mourning where prayers are recited in unison at times, but other periods are given over to spontaneous reminiscences and anecdotes, laughter, and tears extended therapeutically to the point of exhaustion, until mourning has done all it can do. The coda evokes the end of “shiva” where mourners leave the house, returning to their everyday lives.

The final movement of the symphony begins with scurrying figures that gradually lead to a military march (scored just for winds and timpani, and with the only repeat sign in the work). A brief recap of the opening accelerates to a tarantella-like frenzy, crowned with a prophetic-sounding pronouncement by the trumpet. Sometimes I hear the movement as an accompaniment to a newsreel of fleeing emigrés, soldiers, protesters; at others it sounds more like a call to resistance. Much of the movement is related to “Neid” (Envy) from *The Seven Deadly Sins*, where Anna I warns her sister not to envy people (in San Francisco!) who live for pleasure, but to fight for the greater good:

Schwester, folg mir, du wirst sehen, am Ende gehst im Triumph du aus allem hervor.

Sie aber stehen, oh schreckliche Wende, zitternd im Nichts vor verschlossenem Tor.

[Sister, believe me, you will see at the end that you will at last emerge in triumph.

But they will remain, oh terrible fate, trembling in nothingness before the closed door.]

(translation © 1957 by Brook House Music, Inc.)

Although the movement’s timing on the two recordings is nearly the same, Shani brings out more of its underlying feelings of tension, anxiety, and menace that ultimately reach a vision of triumph.

David Schiff
Reed College



Happy End

Renaissance-Theater Berlin

Premiere: 13 May 2022

Of the five productions of Kurt Weill works I attended during the 2021–22 season, the smallest in scale was *Happy End* as presented at Berlin's Renaissance-Theater, a 548-seat Art Deco house in the heart of former West Berlin. With a book by Elisabeth Hauptmann and lyrics by Bertolt Brecht, the piece has been celebrated far more for its score than its dramaturgy. Sebastian Sommer's production, however, manages to rescue this famously challenging play whose 1929 Berlin premiere sharply divided audiences and came under attack from critics who complained both of its triviality and of what they took to be a clumsy agitprop harangue tacked on to the piece's final scene. Set in a Chicago overrun by criminals (like several later Brecht plays), *Happy End* is patently "Hollywoodlich"—inspired by gangster films—an attempt by its three creators to capitalize on the unexpected runaway success of their first musical about criminals, *The Threepenny Opera*. *Happy End*, however, sticks more closely to musical-comedy formula with a clearly delineated gangster hero, Bill Cracker, and a not-quite-saintly Salvation Army heroine, Sister Lilian Holiday. Like *Threepenny*, it employs a satirical *deus ex machina*, but the piece comes much closer to delivering the happy ending promised by the title, complete with two loving if unorthodox couples. The real surprise in the final scene is less the resolution of the romantic plot than the unexpectedly pointed political message that accompanies it.

In *Happy End*, Weill noticeably manipulates musical idioms, providing a potpourri of styles. Stephen Hinton points out that the piece is in fact "a play *about* music"; music is not only integral to the action, but the entire score is "diegetic" in that it involves actual performance [as part of the plot] of one kind or another" to dramatize the conflict between the criminal underworld and the Salvation Army. This plays out in the collision between infectious jazz- or dance-inspired songs and militant or maudlin (and slightly ridiculous) hymns.

As performed by an eager, mostly young cast and a skilled but over-amplified eight-piece band conducted from the keyboard by Harry Ermer, the piece is staged as a fast-moving farce. The set (by Philip Rubner and Alexander Grüner) and costumes (Wicke Naujoks) give it an almost Pop Art luster. The Renaissance-Theater is relatively intimate, with a small stage reduced even further by the set, a sleek, white, rectangular shelter, with shiny sidewalls and narrow windows, that rotates to accommodate different scenes. Because the rectangle, inlaid with LED strips, doubles as a false proscenium that clashes with the real proscenium, the production effectively stages the musical as both the period piece it is and a contemporary reinvention. Although the profiles of the actors and their sometimes stylized movement and make-up evoke German expressionism, the contrastingly bright, angular, solid-colored costumes give it a comic-book feel.



PHOTO: MAX JACKWERTH

The casting of the leads is uniformly strong, with Sophia Euskirchen playing Lilian as a curly-haired waif who wonderfully evokes the Barbra Streisand of the 1970s. She is an accomplished singer, and her beautifully shaped "Surabaya-Johnny" understandably brings Bill to crocodile tears. He is played by Gabriel Schneider as a slippery, gymnastic charmer-cum-snake whose "Bilbao-Song" rings out at the top of the show, while the gang and Salvation Army are cast with actors fresh out of conservatory who give the production youthful vitality. Sommer understands that the musical comedy structure of *Happy End* requires a light touch; he never tries to overload the satire yet manages to play the turn to didacticism at the end absolutely straight. He is aided by the skilled comic work of two older actors in the secondary leads, Jacqueline Macaulay as the Fly, the female leader of the gang, and Klaus Christian Schreiber as Hannibal, the amnesiac lieutenant of the Salvation Army. Their belated reunion is capped by the Fly's well-known speech that Brecht later purloined for Macheath in his revision of *The Threepenny Opera*: "What is a picklock compared with a stock certificate? What is the robbing of a bank compared with the founding of a bank? What is the murder of a man compared with the employment of a man?" Macaulay's posing of these questions cuts through the musical comedy merriment and honors the pungency of Hauptmann's wit. Her speech is followed by a chorus commemorating, in Hinton's words, "the canonization of the saints of capitalism, Morgan, Ford, and Rockefeller, as the local gangsters join forces with the street peddlers of religion." The Fly's big speech and final chorus are both addressed pointedly to the audience, as if to remind us that one of the largest branches of Deutsche Bank sits across the street from the theater. Does the appreciative audience response in 2022 suggest that we are more receptive to *Happy End*'s message—or simply that we have become deadened to its urgency?

David Savran
Berlin

Lost in the Stars

Annapolis Opera

28, 30 October 2022

Weill and librettist Maxwell Anderson called *Lost in the Stars*, based on Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*, a musical tragedy. Its musical variety and long passages of spoken text have long made the show a hot potato, tossed between the worlds of opera and Broadway. Conductor Craig Kier and director Dennis Whitehead Darling have opened up the work, embraced its vast scope and even its messiness. Yes, it's about apartheid's blatant racism. It's also about a country divided between urban and rural mores, and about the degradation of the land and its inability to recover from long periods of drought. How prescient Anderson seems on this theme, given today's concerns over water and climate change. Musically, it encompasses many languages: blues, Christian chants and African ancestral spirit songs, belted Tin Pan Alley bawdiness, operatic arias and big chorus numbers, even a child's song. Under Kier's clean and decisive direction the score becomes a trove of riches, as varied and complex as the people who live on that land.

At the center of the story is a Black minister, Stephen Kumalo, who has tried to lead his people with dignity and righteousness at a shrinking church in a decimated landscape. He leaves his land and community for the capital, to bring his son Absalom home. His efforts to find Absalom open his eyes not only to the perils and seductions of the city but to the tragic plight of so many desperate people. The relationship between father and son refocuses the central theme of the work to personal forgiveness and redemption.

From the moment the lights went down and the back wall of the set was filled with projections of saturated colors and a painterly rendition of the South African countryside, we are transported to Paton's beloved country. Annapolis Opera has delivered a *Lost in the Stars* as bold and life-giving as Peter Leibold's projections—heartfelt and beautifully sung. Nicholas Davis as

The Leader (a narrator figure) enters and sings "The Hills of Ixopo," about the green African hills and the titihoya bird that lives there. The chorus joins in. The song shifts, and projections follow suit; now the hills are red, the dry earth exposed. "The titihoya bird cries no more." Davis's rich bass-baritone conveys both his heartbreak and the beauty of Weill's melodic scoring.

Young soprano Ruth Acheampong sings the role of Irina, the most operatic music in the score, and she is a delight with her pure, beautiful sound infused with pathos. Justin Harrison as John Kumalo demonstrates a supple, warm voice. Kari Dione Lumpkin as the sassy, brassy Linda sells the crowd with appropriate innuendo: "Who'll buy my juicy rutabagas?" Special mention must be made of the three youngest artists: Lincoln Dodson, Christian Eberhardt, and Teagan Miller. Eberhardt in particular brought an authoritative delivery to the mysterious and haunting "Big Mole" that made me hear the song anew as an evocation of the horrible working conditions for Black forced laborers in South Africa's mines. The boy's innocence makes for a chilling contrast. As Stephen, Carl DuPont is magnificent, first embodying in equal measure gravitas and inner peace, then, when his faith fails him, struggling with his inability to save his son. Early in his journey, he sings with an almost sweet wistfulness, "How many miles to the heart of a child? Thousands of miles." By the end of Act I, he reaches a new level of vocal power and emotion with "Lost in the Stars."

There is so much to praise in the production, which solves many of the work's challenges. The beautiful projections, along with set designer April Joy Bastian's artful solution to a flyless proscenium and less-than-graceful civic auditorium, create a mesmerizing physical and psychological world. Tlaloc López-Watermann (lighting) and Heather C. Jackson (costumes) handle transitions seamlessly and trace a clear visual arc for the piece, from vibrant colors in nature to the squalid city, where all is gray. One reservation: long dialogue scenes expose differences in energy and volume between singing and speaking among many of the principal cast. The decision to mic the dialogue proved full of technical glitches and therefore distracting. The performers never fully righted matters, and the ends of some lines got muffled or lost completely. Only Timothy Mix as Stephen's foil, James Jarvis, delivered his speeches resonantly, without losing a word. That aside, I say "bravo" to the company for leaving the dialogue largely intact, conveying the full scope and ambition of the work.

Annapolis Opera has given us a most memorable *Lost in the Stars*, which is Weill at his best. It opened our hearts to seeing our shared humanity and urged us all to call on our better angels.

Susan Galbraith
Washington, D.C.



PHOTO: MICHAEL HALBIG



The Leader (Nicholas Davis)
with the chorus in Act I