FRANCE FALLS FOR THREEPENNY
NEW PRODUCTION IN AIX AND PARIS

JOANA MALLWITZ TAKES BERLIN BY STORM

OUT FROM THE SHADOWS
ELISABETH HAUPTMANN
"The Threepenny Opera wouldn't have happened without me."

LATEST NEWS & REVIEWS
Kurt Weill Newsletter

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Taking Berlin by Storm

EDITOR’S NOTE

Elisabeth Hauptmann, co-creator of Die Dreigroschenoper along with Weill and Brecht, takes center stage in this issue as we explore her contributions to the work. Her participation has always been known and acknowledged but not always fully understood. We join with Brecht scholars, theater historians, and lovers of Die Dreigroschenoper to celebrate Hauptmann as the indispensable collaborator that she was.

In the guise of Esquina de quatrois, Die Dreigroschenoper has had a big year in France, with a new production headlining the Festival d’Aix-en-Provence in July and playing to sold-out houses at the Comédie-Française in the autumn. We suggest here a few of the elements that made it exceptional.

Taking Berlin by Storm

Berlin is quickly on the horizon of Joanna Mallwitz to her new post as music director of the Konzerthausorchester beginning in the 2023–24 season. After holding posts as both symphony and opera conductor in Nuremberg, Erfurt, and Heidelberg, and a stellar array of guest conducting opportunities with opera companies and orchestras all over Europe—her debut at the Salzburg Festival in 2020 made waves—Mallwitz becomes the first woman conductor to lead a major Berlin symphony orchestra. Her debut has inspired much publicity that The Guardian reported, “A virtual unknown in the Berlin capital until recently, the musician says she can no longer go to the supermarket or local bakery without being recognised” (12 October 2022).

Mallwitz’s choices for her inaugural program on 31 August 2023! For her first concert, she chose first symphonies: Prokofiev’s Classical Symphony, Weill’s Symphonie in einem Satz, and Mahler’s Symphony no. 1. Weill’s symphony, programmed recently by the Berlin Philharmonic under Kirill Petrenko in 2021, struck many observers as the most obscure of the group. Composed in 1921 during Weill’s tenure in Ferruccio Busoni’s master class, the score was lost for decades and has always been considered something of an anomaly in Weill’s oeuvre, not only because it is a symphonic poem composed by a master of theater music, but because the expressionist idioms bear little resemblance to his later, more familiar, work.

Mallwitz’s decision was not in itself unusual. Many composers have been recognized for their symphonies during the first concert, and some have even been recognized for their first orchestrations. For example, Dvořák wrote his first symphony in 1865, Bruckner composed his first symphony in 1865, and Mahler composed his first symphony in 1880. In 1923, Weill wrote his first symphony, the Garden Symphony, which premiered under conductor Franz Schreker at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires.

Weill’s Symphony in einem Satz is a more serious and innovative piece than his earlier works, and, like Mahler’s Symphony no. 1, it is a powerful symphony that is still in demand today.

Taking Berlin by Storm...
Shortly after they met in Berlin in 1924, Hauptmann began an intensive collaboration with Brecht that lasted until 1933, when both had to flee Germany, and resumed in the U.S. and then again in Germany in the 1940s. Nearly everything published under Brecht’s name during his lifetime until Hauptmann’s own death in 1973 passed through her hands. Even when Hauptmann herself did not write work attributed to Brecht—the lyrics of the “Alabama-Song” are hers, for example—she participated actively in the conception and construction of Brecht’s plays and sometimes revised or edited his poems. In 1956, Lotte Lenya memorably described her as Brecht’s “vigilant shadow.”

After Elisabeth Hauptmann learned in 1927 of a successful revival of John Gay’s Beggar’s Opera in London that ran for several years, she purchased a modern edition of the ballad opera, including vocal lines and lyrics, and began to translate the text into German, as she translated, she changed things here and there on her own initiative. At some point early in 1928, she started showing selected scenes to Bertolt Brecht in an effort to get him interested. The strategy worked; she and Brecht added “Das Bettler Oper” (German for “The Beggar’s Opera”) to their project list and began working on the text in earnest. As Lotte Lenya recalled in 1956, Hauptmann gave “the German text to Brecht one scene at a time…. At odd intervals—for fun, for relaxation—he began fiddling with this scene or that, keeping intact what suited him, boldly adding or subtracting as he saw fit.” Anything kept “intact,” of course, was Brehimann’s work.

One of the most famous accounts of the genesis of Die Dreigroschenoper comes from producer Ernst Josef Aufricht, who recalled meeting with Brecht and asking him for a play to open his theater. Brecht mentioned the Beggar’s Opera as an afterthought, and Aufricht asked for the not-yet-complete script. He read it the next day and was hooked. We don’t know whether he was aware that the still unfinished text was a joint effort or that Hauptmann was an essential member of Brecht’s inner circle. Brecht preferred to work with others in the room; the not-yet-complete script. He read it the next day and was hooked. Hauptmann and Brecht met with director Giorgio Strehler as he prepared a new production of Die Dreigroschenoper, signed on 26 April 1928, which specified that Hauptmann would receive a 12-1/2% share of authors’ royalties. It also specified unambiguously that she was collaborating on the script (“an dem Buch mitarbeitet”), towards the end of Brecht’s life, in 1955, Hauptmann and Brecht met with director Georgio Strehler as he prepared a new production of Die Dreigroschenoper. Their conversation, transcribed by Hans Blunge, contained an unequivocal statement: “Brecht and Hauptmann reported that a play was needed for the opening of the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm (managed by Fischer and Aufricht) on 31 August 1928. Brecht had Die Dreigroschenoper in the works: it was based on a translation by Hauptmann. Further work with Weill and Elisabeth Hauptmann was a true collaboration that proceeded step by step.”

Indeed, it took a “true collaboration” of those three, each making an essential contribution, to create Die Dreigroschenoper. Most scholars, theater professionals, and journalists have come to acknowledge a fact that has been there all along: this eternally popular music theater piece had three co-creators, not two.
1924 November: Hauptmann meets Brecht in Berlin. He is impressed with her command of literature and languages, and asks her to work with him. She helps Brecht both with literary matters and with working out musical settings of poems.

1925-26: Hauptmann collaborates intensively with Brecht on Real, Mann ist Mann, and Tischpostille. She writes two poems in English, “Alabama-Song” and “Beneares-Song,” for the “Mahagonny-Gesänge” in Tischpostille; her work is not credited.

1927 March: Weill meets Brecht.


1927 late summer: Weill, Brecht, and Hauptmann begin near-daily work on the libretto of the full-length opera Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny.

1927 December: Hauptmann orders a copy of The Beggar’s Opera (“Des Bettlers Oper”) and begins a German translation/adaptation. Her efforts kindle Brecht’s interest.

1928 April?: Novice producer Ernst Josef Aufrecht meets Brecht and learns of “Des Bettlers Oper.” Upon reading the incomplete text-in-progress, Aufrecht agrees to produce it at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm.

1928 April 26: Weill and Brecht sign a contract with Felix Bloch Erben for theatrical protection for the entirety of the work lasting through 2043.

1929 May 25: Hauptmann gives an interview to Lotte Lenya and George Davis in Berlin in which she recalls the genesis and development of Die Dresigroschenoper. The interview becomes source material for Lenya’s article, “That Was a Time,” published May 1956 in Theatre Arts magazine.

1930 January: Hauptmann and Weill return to New York. She writes to Brecht’s son Stefan in 1957, “I was never paid noper...I was never his secretary. She is my collaborator. Hauptmann moved to Berlin and agrees to work with Brecht and Suhkamp. Hauptmann as an essential co-creator of Die Dresigroschenoper is not my secretary. She worked with Brecht as an equal. She accords her a 12.5% share.

1933 January: Kepekheuer publishes the third volume of Brecht’s Versuche, which contains a revised version of the book and lyrics of Die Dresigroschenoper prepared by Hauptmann and Brecht. The front cover of Heft 3 of the Versuche bears only Brecht’s name. At the end of the Dresigroschenoper, however, the credits read “Brecht. Hauptmann. Weill.” with no elaboration.

1949 February 7: Brecht signs a contract with Suhkamp Verlag in Frankfurt that makes it the new publisher and licensor of almost all of Brecht’s plays, including Dresigroschenoper; the same contract specifies that Hauptmann shall be authorized to negotiate with theaters on his behalf and to edit his works for publication. A rider to the contract lists Brecht’s dramatic works to be represented by Suhkamp, each with its collaborators. Hauptmann and Weill are both credited for Die Dresigroschenoper.

1954: Hauptmann becomes Dramaturgin of the Berliner Ensemble and collaborates on new work with Brecht. She also continues as editor of his works for publication and as agent in arranging productions of Dresigroschenoper and other works.

1955 May 25: Hauptmann gives an interview to Lotte Lenya and George Davis in Berlin in which she recalls the genesis and development of Die Dresigroschenoper. The interview became source material for Lenya’s article, “That Was a Time,” published May 1956 in Theatre Arts magazine.


1977: Aufbau-Verlag publishes a posthumous collection of Hauptmann’s writings, Julia ohne Rames.

2018: Feature films by Heinrich Breloer (a Brecht biopic) and Joachim Lang (an account of the genesis and success of Brecht’s Dresigroschenoper and his film treatment, Die Brüle) both depict Hauptmann as an essential co-creator of Die Dresigroschenoper and credit her as such.


2023 October: Suhkamp issues a press release explaining that many of Brecht’s works will remain under copyright in the European Union after 2026, the seventieth anniversary of his death. Because of Hauptmann’s collaboration, Die Dresigroschenoper is a prime example, with protection for the entirety of the work lasting through 2043.

Please visit a comprehensive chronology of Hauptmann’s collaboration at https://www.kfw.org/research-center/elisabeth-hauptmann-chronology
She became my best collaborator. She has an extraordinary talent for languages and collaborated actively and critically in all of my dramatic works.

— Bertolt Brecht on Elisabeth Hauptmann, 1935
The fact that Hauptmann was a co-creator of Die Dreigroschenoper has implications beyond literary history. Suhrkamp Verlag, the publisher of Brecht’s works and licensor of productions of his plays, has already affirmed that Die Dreigroschenoper remains protected by copyright in the European Union until 2044.

THE PUBLISHERS SPEAK

Press Release: Suhrkamp Verlag, October 2023 (excerpt)

Bertolt Brecht died on 14 August 1956. Therefore, all of Brecht’s works for which he is the sole rights holder will enter public domain on 1 January 2027. It is well known that Brecht created some works (especially stage works) with others, either fellow rights owners or collaborative composers.

A prominent example is Die Dreigroschenoper, for which Elisabeth Hauptmann is a rights holder who has received royalties since the world premiere in 1928. Hauptmann died on 20 April 1973. Thus, according to German law § 65 Abs. 1 UrhG, Die Dreigroschenoper is protected by copyright until 31 December 2043. By German law § 65 Abs. 3 UrhG, Weill’s music for Die Dreigroschenoper is protected until the same date.

European American Music

Copyright laws in the United States differ from those in the European Union. In the case of Dreigroschenoper, there is no single date of US copyright expiration for the entire work. The licensing agent for Dreigroschenoper in the US, European American Music Corporation, summarizes the situation after 1 January 2024:

“In the United States, works created before 1978 generally receive a 95-year term of copyright protection beginning with the year of either the work’s first publication or its pre-publication copyright registration, whichever occurs first. The term of protection applies only to the elements of the publication as registered, such as a libretto, individual songs, or a piano-vocal score. When components of a single work have differing publication/registration dates, the terms of copyright protection vary accordingly. For example, the initial German libretto and vocal score of Dreigroschenoper were first published in 1928. Their contents will indeed therefore enter the public domain on 1 January 2027. Lyric and song titles not included in the original versions published in 1928 remain protected longer. For example, Weill’s full score and orchestrations (and any arrangements thereof) will remain under copyright in the U.S. through 2047. A substantial amount of additional material that first appeared in print in the critical edition of Dreigroschenoper (2000) will be protected through 2095. All existing English translations continue to enjoy protection, as well.”

For more detailed information, see www.kwf.org/contact/copyright

The company acted with driven intensity and a fluidity rarely seen in the opera house.

Stephen J. Mudge, Opera News, October 2023

A Fistful of Firsts

The new production was distinguished by a number of things that had never happened before:

- “Pau! Madam’ Peachum,” written by Weill and Yvette Guilbert for a 1937 Paris production of L’opéra de quat’sous, was sung for the first time in a stage production (by Véronique Vella as Mrs. Peachum).
- Alexandre Pateau’s new French translation was performed for the first time.
- Longtime stage director Thomas Ostermeier led his first music theater work.
- A full company from the Comédie-Française appeared for the first time at the Aix festival.
- The festival opened with a stage work other than a grand opera for the first time.

The Music

We had vigorous discussions with our conductor Maxime Pascal about phrasing and prosody. The characters must suddenly begin singing with no connection to what came just before. We had to discover how to move from speaking to singing in a way that doesn’t sound like a Disney movie.

Interview with actor Benjamin Lavrenche (Tiger Brown) by Juliette de Banes Gardonne, Le Temps, 3 July 2023

Conductor Maxime Pascal of Le Balcon has led the band from the very first performance to heights of dynamism, lucid ensemble playing, and rich orchestral color. The players bring energy to a production that has obviously chosen to limit the energy onstage.

Philipp Venturini, Le Echos, 5 July 2023

For once, Maxime Pascal’s musical choices miss the point. Just because there are references to Mahler, Schoenberg, or Stravinsky in Weill’s score doesn’t mean the conductor had to take the music in a serious direction. That does Weill no favors.

Sophie Bourdais, Télérama, 30 July 2023

À la Française

Extraordinary Team Tackles L’opéra de quat’sous

A landmark production of Die Dreigroschenoper inaugurated the Aix-en-Provence opera festival on 4 July 2023, moving to Paris in September. L’opéra de quat’sous (four-penny opera), as it is still known in France, drew a remarkable volume of attention for a host of reasons. We can’t hope to sum up the highly publicized production in this space; the sampling below from the press, organized by topic, may give a feel for the efforts that went into the staging, and its broader significance.

The Cast

The actors are all excellent, and they can sing, too! Véronique Vella’s amazing Mrs. Peachum, captivating and loud. The elegant and grave Jenny of Elsa Lepoitre, Claima Claverson’s sensual and ardent Lucy, and the perfectly judged sassy of Marie Oppert as Polly. As for the men, we honor Birane Ra’s moving characterization of Macbeth, a sentimental Brown played by Benjamin Lavrenche, and above all the irresistible Christian Heeg [Mr. Peachum], halfway between comedian and psychopath.

Marie-Aude Roux, Le Monde, 5 July 2023

Then Polly Peachum enters, spotlight in the center of the stage to deliver that legendary song “Seeäubähne.” Here Marie Oppert [Lena Competition Trustee’s Award, 2020] offers unabated operatic pleasure. The actor began her career as a singer, and it shows. Her Polly gave the opera festival audience the gift of opulent vocal ability.

Eberhard Spreng, Der Tagesspiegel, 5 July 2023

Ostermeier’s visually subdued production derives most of its pleasures from letting the cast’s superb talents loose.

Laura Cappello, New York Times, 6 July 2023

The company acted with driven intensity and a fluidity rarely seen in the opera house.
**Design**

Just to complicate matters here, the frame of visual reference is firmly Russian. Graphi
cic video and black metal sets (by Sébastien Dupuyer and Magda Willi) take motifs from the 1920s creation of Meyerhold and Maya
kovsky, creating the utopian aesthetic world which was soon to be destroyed by disillus
sionment and despair.

Nicholas Kenyon, The Telegraph, 5 July 2023

... Magda Willi’s set design, constructivist and very effective; Sébastien Dupuyer’s videos in form of collages, with homages to Edwa
der Maybridge and the Lumière brothers; the flawless light design of Urs Schönbein ...