



# Kurt Weill Newsletter

VOLUME 42

NUMBER 1

SPRING 2024

**2024  
LENYA FINALS:**  
*SIMPLY  
STUNNING!*

**ENSEMBLE  
MODERN**  
LIGHTS UP  
CARNEGIE HALL

**JEREMY  
WEISS**  
REPORTS ON  
STREET SCENES  
IN PARIS

## MAHAGONNY

David Drew's lost article on Weill's  
satirical opera surfaces after 45 years



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<https://www.kwf.org/newsletter/>

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Published twice a year, the Kurt Weill Newsletter features articles and reviews (books, performances, recordings) that center on Kurt Weill but take a broader look at issues of twentieth-century music and theater. With a print run of 4,000 copies, the Newsletter is distributed worldwide. Subscriptions are free. The editor welcomes the submission of articles, reviews, and news items for consideration.

A variety of opinions are expressed in the Newsletter; they do not necessarily represent the publisher's official viewpoint. Letters to the editor are welcome.

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Love Life: Published for the First Time!

Scholars and performers now have an unprecedented opportunity to study one of Weill's least understood musicals, Love Life (book by Alan Jay Lerner; music and lyrics by Weill and Lerner). The new critical edition by Joel Galand (Kurt Weill Edition, Series I, volume 21) sets forth an authoritative score and script but doesn't stop there; it offers a full account of the genesis, development, and premiere of the 1948 Broadway show along with a consideration of its essential influence—as the "first concept musical"—on American theater ever since. Accompanied by a compendious critical report that provides thorough descriptions of source material and a complete account of editorial decisions, this new edition instantly becomes the standard reference for anyone wishing to study, perform, or understand Love Life. Just in time for two new productions next season! (See p. 18.)

EDITOR'S NOTE

The published work of David Drew has formed the basis of modern Weill scholarship, yet much of his commentary on Weill's life and work remains unpublished. It is no less worthy for that, and the Newsletter has the privilege of presenting in this issue the first half of an article intended to coincide with the Metropolitan Opera premiere of Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny in 1979. The complete article appears on kwf.org.

Ensemble Modern, closely associated with Weill's music for decades, performed during Carnegie Hall's Weimar Republic-themed festival this spring. We chronicle that concert, a highlight of the festival, and several others, along with the Ensemble's historic visit to the Foundation.

Coming Home

Universal Edition in Vienna published upwards of fifteen of Weill's works between 1924 and 1933. Weill submitted manuscripts from which Universal prepared performing materials; in accordance with the norms of the time, he ceded ownership of the manuscripts he had created as well as the copyrights of the works. Since 1998, Universal's collection of Weill manuscripts, created by him or by staff editors—including autograph orchestral scores of Die Dreigroschenoper, Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny, Die Bürgschaft, and many others—has been on deposit at the Sibley Music Library in Rochester, NY.

In December 2023, the Foundation purchased the "Weill/UE Collection" from Universal Edition. The scores will remain on deposit in Special Collections at Sibley Music Library. They will continue to be accessible to researchers and the existing finding aid on the Library's website will remain functional. The acquisition of the documents by the Foundation leaves ownership of copyrights of the works unaltered, with Universal Edition still holding publishing rights in certain territories.

Tell Your Friends

Foundation staff have conceived and curated a brand-new Weill playlist for Spotify under the title "Discovering Kurt Weill: Top Ten." Vocal and instrumental music are both represented, and the tracks range from Louis Armstrong's classic "Mack the Knife" to the third movement of Weill's Fantaisie symphonique. Hear Melissa Errico ("I'm a Stranger Here Myself"), Billie Holiday ("Speak Low"), Teresa Stratas ("Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib?"), Lotte Lenya ("Denn wie man sich bettet"), and more! Weill is all over Spotify, but this list is designed specifically as an introduction to his music. Keep an ear open; more playlists are on the way.

CALLING ALL READERS: The Foundation is considering phasing out the print edition of the Newsletter and moving to exclusively online publication. Please write to newsletter@kwf.org to help us determine the future of the Newsletter.

We are pleased to welcome to our pages 2022 Lenya Competition prizewinner Jeremy Weiss, whose account of rehearsals for an abridged production of Street Scene in Paris does much to explain why Weill's work continues to speak to today's pressing issues and appeal to audiences. As happens every spring, we pass along stories and photos from the Lenya Competition finals and news from the world of Weill. Kim H. Kowalke offers a memorable tribute to his longtime comrade, Guy Stern.

Once again we thank Mike Gerard, whose inimitable covers and layouts enliven this issue of the Newsletter immeasurably.

Dave Stein



Announcing KURT WEILL MUSIC

The Foundation is pleased to announce its creation of a new publishing entity, Kurt Weill Music, as of 1 January 2024. "KWM" will henceforth hold all rights in Weill's compositions previously assigned to European American Music Corp. (EAMC). These works will continue to be administered by European American Music Distributors Company (EAMDC), which will license performance, media, and other uses of Weill's music and will rent performing materials as agent for KWM. Mechanisms and procedures for licensing Weill's works formerly owned by EAMC will therefore remain largely unchanged. Hal Leonard will continue to act as the sales agent for printed music in North America, as will Schott elsewhere. Please see kurtweillmusic.com for further information and consult the licensing guide on kwf.org.

2024 Grant Recipients

Professional Performance  
Central City Opera, Central City, CO. Street Scene.  
The Opera People, Singapore. The Seven Deadly Sins.

College/University and Amateur Performance  
Brevard Music Center, Brevard, NC. The Threepenny Opera.  
Curtis Institute of Music, Philadelphia, PA. The Seven Deadly Sins.  
DePaul University, Chicago, IL. Street Scene.  
New World Symphony, Miami, FL. The Seven Deadly Sins.  
University of Maryland, College Park - National Orchestral Institute, College Park, MD. The Seven Deadly Sins.  
University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL. Street Scene.

Research and Travel  
Ester Gonzalez Martin  
Dissertation chapter on Weill's esthetics in the US.

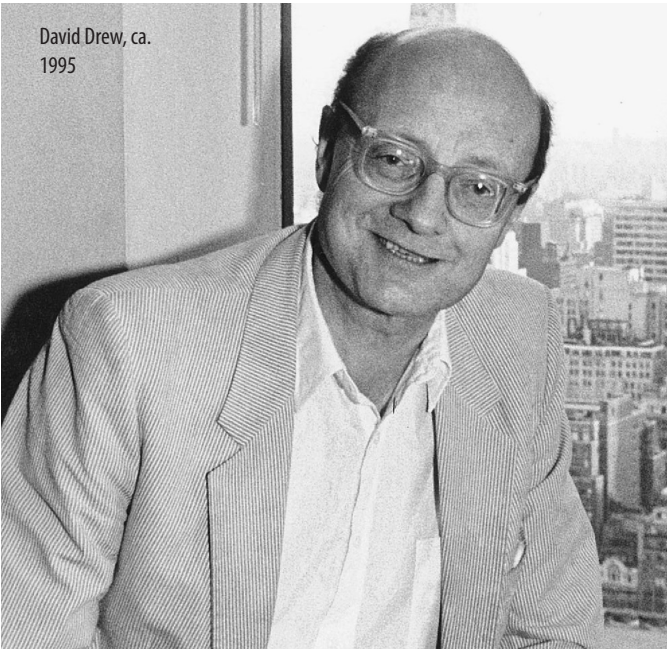


The text of this previously unpublished essay by the supremely influential Weill scholar David Drew stems from two sources. The primary source, a corrected proof of an article intended for *Opera News* in 1979 (coinciding with the premiere of *Mahagonny* at the Met) and subsequently rejected without explanation, was discovered in the fall of 2023 among Drew’s papers at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin. In the 1990s, Drew revisited the text and recorded a number of revisions in a proposed book on Weill’s works; that revised version was shared with Foundation President Kim H. Kowalke and deposited in the Weill-Lenya Research Center. To arrive at the version printed below, we have carefully compared the two versions and incorporated a number of Drew’s own changes that modify or elaborate his earlier conclusions. The text is published with the kind permission of the Estate of David Drew.

This year we observe the fifteenth anniversary of Drew’s passing. The Foundation honors the occasion by renewing our commitment to make Drew’s extensive Weill-related writings generally available. Much of the work published during his lifetime has been posted on kwf.org, but a great deal of unpublished work remains. Another excerpt from Drew’s commentaries, “Struggling for Supremacy: The Libretto of Mahagonny” appeared in the Fall 2009 *Newsletter*. We are delighted to have the opportunity to present another portion of Drew’s remarkable corpus and to shed more light on what he considered one of Weill’s most challenging works.

# Mahagonny’s Musical Roots

by David Drew



## I. Mahagonny and “popular” idioms

If the strengths of *Mahagonny* have generally been underestimated, and its weaknesses overlooked or wrongly defined, it is because of the notion that music lacking technical complexities of the kind manifest in the work of Weill’s modernist contemporaries is probably of minor importance and certainly not of a sort that requires the listener’s sustained attention. Brecht himself encouraged that notion and pandered to his literary followers by describing the opera as “Spas” (fun, amusement). Its early opponents no less persuasively labeled it a “jazz opera.”

The nearest Weill actually comes to a jazz idiom is in the two brief episodes associated with Trinity Moses’ interventions,

at once diabolic, manipulative, and obscene, in the brothel scene. While it would be wrong to read a comparable critique into more extensive passages where the texture and syncopated accompaniment figures owe something to dance band and revue orchestra styles of the day, such passages are invariably placed at a critical angle to the text, the action, or both. Not for one moment—not even for the final “blue” cadence of No. 5 (“Wenn man an einem fremden Strand kommt”)—does Weill embrace jazz idioms with anything akin to the naïve and trustful ardor characteristic of the jazz adventures of such contemporaries as Milhaud and Martinů, Krenek and Tansman.

In 1929 Weill published in *Anbruch* a short note about jazz and its influence. He concluded by suggesting that the influence jazz had exerted on the rhythms, harmonies and forms of serious music—even on the recent trend towards greater “simplicity and comprehensibility”—was less important than the lessons yet to be learned from jazz *players*, whose example he believed might help banish the rigidities and overspecialization of academically trained instrumentalists.

If, after forty years or more, most listeners would agree that the *Mahagonny* score is thoroughly un-“American” in sound, it is perhaps because they would also agree, with less justification, that it is the musical incarnation of pre-Hitler Berlin. The *Dreigroschenoper* mystique has been transferred to *Mahagonny*, despite the marked dissimilarity of the two scores. The confusion may be traced back to the 1931 Berlin production of *Mahagonny*, which was partly designed and largely promoted on the strength of the *Dreigroschenoper*’s box-office success. For various reasons, particularly because of the casting of Lotte Lenya in the role of Jenny—which in consequence became a star role at the expense of Begbick’s more central one—that production became part of the post-1945 mythology of pre-1933 Berlin. It has also lent support to the idea that *Mahagonny*, if not a jazz opera, is at least a cabaret opera.

In this sense, the “Alabama-Song” and Jenny’s version of

“Denn wie man sich bettet” emerge once again in their guise as *the* representative numbers. The cabaret formulas latent in the patterned routines of “Auf nach Mahagonny” and in the ironic contrasts of the “Benares-Song” are here openly acknowledged. But unless extensively rearranged and virtually homogenized, both songs are as unsuitable for cabaret singers as the rest of Jenny’s music (the recitatives, the “Kraniche-Duett,” and a few briefer interventions). The “Alabama-Song” calls for a rare combination of sharp attack and sustained tone, and its final coloratura extravaganza makes sense only if performed with supercilious ease. “Denn wie man sich bettet” poses various problems of intonation: the singer is melodically unsupported throughout the tortuous chromaticism of the introduction, and the structural cornerstone is a high A that must be firmly sustained and sensitively phrased if the formal coherence of the song’s two sections is to be preserved. Weill would not have been the practical musician he was had he imagined that a cabaret singer could do full justice to either of these songs. When he came to write the Lenya version of “Ach bedenken Sie, Herr Jacob Schmidt,” he was less demanding, yet he conceded only the bare minimum that was practically necessary. The song was not meant to sound easy, and its comparative simplicity is balanced by a free form owing nothing to cabaret conventions or to contemporary popular idioms.

Those *Mahagonny* idioms that *are* directly related to popular (though rarely contemporary) songs are representative of the Berlin of the 1920s only in the sense that they are thoroughly cosmopolitan. Even if the *Threepenny Opera* established a Berlin type, there are no songs of that type in *Mahagonny*. The zither waltz in the Act II eating tableau would be pure Vienna but for the fact that its Straussian suspensions and anticipations owe as much to Richard as to Johann the Younger, thus taking note of traditional Bavarian appetites. Those who hear nothing but the surface humor of the music misinterpret even that humor.

The Act III trial scene ranges even farther from Berlin. Though there are incidental suggestions of an Italianate tarantella rhythm, the main rhythmic character is Spanish. The music seems to draw comparisons between the atmosphere of the trial and that of some disreputable fairground bullfight. Just as Begbick’s picadors use poisoned barbs, so does the bandmaster inject a shot of commercial “pop” into the bucolic idiom: the trial scene’s orchestral ritornello is in general character reminiscent of José Padilla’s “Valencia,” a *pasodoble* that swept the world of light music after its publication in Paris in 1925 and was still going the rounds forty years later. In a provocatively *frech*, anti-elitist and “un-German” reply to a request from the magazine *Uhu* for a list of his six favorite tunes, Weill placed “Valencia” third on the list and (“you will laugh,” he wrote) the “Alabama-Song” last. With Weill, irony and affection are interlocked.

Neither melodically nor harmonically, however, is there any direct allusion to “Valencia.” Of exact quotation from popular tunes, in the tradition of Bizet’s quotations from salon music by Yradier and others in *Carmen*, there are two famous examples in *Mahagonny*—“The Maiden’s Prayer” and “Asleep in the Deep.” Both are relics of nineteenth-century petit bourgeois romanticism, and neither has anything to do with Berlin, though Weill seems to have imagined that “Asleep in the Deep” (as “Stürmisch die Nacht”) was a traditional German sea song.

“Das ist die ewige Kunst” (That’s eternal art), murmurs Jack in response to the first set of variations on “The Maiden’s Prayer.” The more we laugh at his naïveté, the more the joke’s on us. With just such a trap did Shakespeare in the play scene of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* catch his stage audience—perhaps his theater audience too—in the act of congratulating itself on its superior culture. But Jack, like Bottom and his friends, has stumbled on an elusive truth. It has been said of Weill’s treatment of “The Maiden’s Prayer” that “While one smiles ... one is also oddly and perhaps disturbingly touched.” As early as the second sentence of the theme, Weill has elaborated Thekla Badarzewska’s routine harmony and introduced a plangency of his own. The “vulgar tavern musick which makes one man merry and another mad” may, as Sir Thomas Browne remarks, strike others “with a deep devotion.” That Weill was in some sense devoted to “The Maiden’s Prayer” would be evident from the fifth bar onward even without the testimony he provided, in quite another connection, some eighteen years later, when he wrote, “The pianist in the early movie theaters ... has become a part of history, often quoted, imitated, laughed at, and parodied. To most people of my age, the sound of the piano in the nickelodeons is a cherished childhood memory, and many times when we see one of those standard situations in a movie—the villain triumphing over his innocent victim; the daughter being expelled from her father’s house; the mother being separated from her child—we are longing to hear again that tinny old worn-out piano playing ‘The March of the Gladiators,’ ‘The Maiden’s Prayer’ or the *William Tell* overture” (“Music in the Movies,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, September 1946, p. 398).

There is a certain longing implicit in everything Weill has introduced to Badarzewska’s music. It is in no way a sentimentalization of his childhood memory. On the contrary, the irrelevance to adult experience is clearly registered. On one level the music is shown to be a regressive fantasy, whose attractions are analogous to those of Begbick’s spurious haven. Yet there is another level: the artistic reality of the paraphrase begins as an objective disclosure of the model’s unreality but continues as an expression of subjective feeling. So far from mocking Badarzewska, Weill pays her childlike artlessness the tribute of his own art, and through the dis-







covery of precisely what is genuine but hitherto latent in the music's hopeful *espressivo*, lends substance to Jack's reaction.

If we, whose ears are not Jack's, are disturbed as well as touched by the music, it is perhaps because of the pianist's virtuosity and the uncertainty as to whether Jack is admiring that or the moonstruck tune. The pianist is part of Begbick's sales drive, and there is something appropriately devilish about his Lisztian cascades. Jim interrupts the variations with music of such frank and rough-hewn simplicity that the pianist cannot resume his task without seeming more of a trickster than ever.

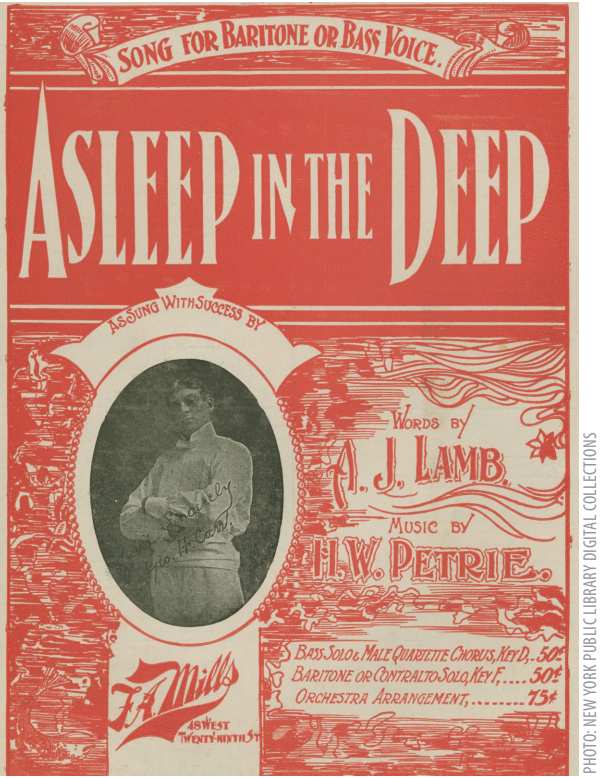
It is there, rather than in the quotation of Badarzewska's guileless tune, that the musical humor lies. Music in which technique is unrelated to the solution of compositional problems was not a part of Weill's creative world. In this instance and in his psychology, it initiates a symbolic unfrocking of the Abbé Liszt, who (through Busoni) was his musical grandfather. But the ceremony is not concluded. Despite himself, and despite all that nineteenth-century individualism had come to represent for his generation, Weill still cared enough for Liszt to forgive him everything. In the darling of the salons he saw a strange premonition of the nickel-odeon pianist, and once again his cherished childhood memory came to the rescue. The keyboard embellishments would not be nearly so funny or at all disturbing if they did not achieve the elegance Badarzewska yearns for.

Petrie's "Asleep in the Deep" is likewise rescued from the nineteenth-century parlors, but in this case there is no implied criticism. Where the transformation of "The Maiden's Prayer" is complete and artistic—it becomes an integral part of the ensemble—the quotation of "Asleep in the Deep" is exact and realistic: the drunken singers recall, as such singers are wont to do, a vulgar and merry tune. Since the merriment comes from the bottle rather than the heart, it is short-lived. Even had it been spontaneous, it could not have survived long in Mahagonny, where the happy songs are the forbidden songs. In *Mahagonny*, the music that looks as if it is light turns out to have the same specific gravity as the music that manifestly is not.

Each crisis or moment of extreme intensity in the opera, without exception, is preceded by some allusion to the idioms of popular entertainment music. As the opera progresses, the fatal character of the allusions becomes even more apparent. From *Don Giovanni*, particularly from its final scene, Weill has learned something appropriate to his purpose. A hedonist to the last, the Don calls for his favorite tunes, and to their equivocally merry accompaniment enjoys his last meal. Like the Don's tunes, the two hits from which Weill quotes, plus the other two he has composed himself, are in the major mode. So are the equally fateful zither waltz and the Alaska duet. Apart from them, there is no major-key music in *Mahagonny*. These tunes, refugees from

lands that no longer exist or wishful emigrants to a never-never land, have no rights and no franchise in a territory ruled with an iron fist by the minor mode. Behind their smiling masks are the lineaments of fear.

*Drew's article continues with "Mahagonny and Tradition," an account of the relations between Weill and his contemporaries, particularly Hindemith and Stravinsky, and predecessors—Mozart, Weber, Wagner, Mahler, and others—as revealed in Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny. His characteristically trenchant observations help to define the uniqueness of Mahagonny even as they show that the work owes more to the great tradition of German opera than to modernism. The essay closes with a deconstruction of Theodor W. Adorno's critique of Mahagonny. We are prevented from printing the second part solely by considerations of space; we are pleased to present the complete article on the Foundation's web site: <https://www.kwf.org/wp-content/uploads/mahagonnys-musical-roots.pdf>*



# “Street Scenes”: Art, Life, and the Melting Pot

The perennial favorite *Street Scene* took on new and different life at MC93 in Bobigny, a suburb of Paris, in April 2024. Led by the director-conductor team of Ted Huffman and Yshani Perinpanayagam, members of the Academy of l'Opéra de Paris and guest artists gave five performances of an abridged version called “Street Scenes: Fragments de l'opéra de Broadway de 1948 [recte: 1947], *Street Scene*.” We asked Lenya Competition laureate Jeremy Weiss (Third Prize, 2022), who played the role of Harry Easter, to contribute tales from the rehearsal room and his own reflections on the work and production.

2 Americans, 1 Turk, 3 Ukrainians, 1 Russian, 4 French, 1 Scot, 1 Brit, 1 Italian, 1 Brazilian, and 1 Romanian walk into a room four floors underground in Paris's Opéra Bastille—sounds like the beginning of a bad joke, but actually it was the beginning of our passionate production of “Street Scenes.”

From the first day of rehearsals, it was clear that Ted Huffman was determined to celebrate what makes each of us unique. While the libretto clearly dictates accents for each character, Ted chose to embrace each of our different English dialects, organically bringing our distinct voices into the world of *Street Scene*. Furthermore, as the creative team welcomed the variety of cultural backgrounds, worldviews, and accents, they welded us into a cohesive group. On our first day of staging rehearsals, choreographer Jenny Ogilvie led us in a series of ensemble-building exercises and games; in one of them, we walked around the room trying to change speeds all at the same time only by feeling each other's presence. The entire ensemble worked to develop a sense of deep listening, below the level of words. A version of this exercise actually became the first tableau of the piece; each of our characters transitioned into the world of “Street Scenes” by stepping onto the stage at intervals, joining the rhythm of the others in the space, during Weill's powerful overture. Jenny and Ted built a deeply unified ensemble while respecting and retaining everyone's distinctive individuality. Theater reflects real-world politics; nations must wrestle with how to hold onto a unique cultural identity while simultaneously embracing diversity and globalism. That's one of the core tensions in *Street Scene*, and in Weill's life as well: the tension between community and one's own individual roots in the midst of a melting pot. Who is an insider and who is

an outsider, how do we know, and how does that change over the course of an opera, or a life?

During lunch early in the rehearsal process, I sat next to Teona Todua, who played Rose Maurrant, and we started talking about her background. She is Ukrainian along with two other members of the Academy, Ihor Mostovoi (Frank Maurrant) and Sofia Anisimova (Mrs. Hildebrand). Teona's family was forced to flee Russian territory before the current conflict; they currently live in Kyiv and do not want to flee again, in spite of the war. I realized that she was living with constant stress over her parents' well-being. Yet Teona was such a cheerful, warm person throughout



the entire rehearsal process, and she greeted me with a gleeful smile and a big hug before every show! She is the perfect embodiment of Rose, who reminds us not to “forget the lilac bush, bright in the morning sun” even in the worst of times. Her friend, the talented Russian soprano Margarita Polonskaya (Anna Maurrant), sat nearby as we talked, and it hit me: tension between people from warring nations translates exactly into the tenelements in Elmer Rice's New York City, but such conflicts need not prevent us from coming together. The characters of *Street Scene* must work through conflicting perspectives and backgrounds, and we did, too. In this way, our tight-knit cast slipped gracefully into Weill's work.

And, man, this diverse group of individuals could *sing*! Even during our first music rehearsal, I got shivers up my spine from Kevin Punnackal's (Sam Kaplan) “Lonely House,” with his powerful, expressive, smoky timbre. Teona's rendition of “What Good Would the Moon Be?” brought me close to tears, with her silvery legato evoking the full beauty of the words and music. Seray Pinar's hilarious, vibrant version of “Get a Load of That” had me



laughing in my seat. I could tell that this team of singers loved singing Weill’s music, and all through rehearsals they sang it with such heart.

Our conductor, Yshani Perinpanayagam, with experience in classical music and musical theater, led the charge. She was truly the ideal person to guide the musical vision of this production. A leader of such generous, collaborative, and kind spirit, she delicately shaped the musical texture of the piece, moving seamlessly between the styles of Weill’s composition, from German neo-romanticism to musical theater to jazz. Collaborating with Yshani was a dream as she sculpted each musical line in full accord with the drama and its staging. For my number, “Wouldn’t You Like to Be on Broadway?” we created together a musical shape that served the suave, seductive nature of the character, and a vocal style between classical and musical theater.

At the *Sitzprobe* (or “italien,” as they call it in French), the space was full of energy and also full of people—we had an orchestra of more than fifty musicians drawn from the Academy of l’Opéra de Paris and the Orchestra Ostinato. During this rehearsal, the energy of the production soared. Weill’s orchestrations are masterful, using colors of the brass, winds, and strings to shade each line of music. Yshani worked carefully with the orchestra to find the exactitude and power of the more classical passages and the swing of the jazz and musical theater selections. Singing “Wouldn’t You Like to Be on Broadway?” with the orchestra, I sensed new layers of character coming through just from the timbres of Weill’s orchestration; it felt utterly fresh with the swinging emphasis from the brass and the warm, seductive colors in the strings. The whole cast was intoxicated by Weill’s prowess as an orchestrator.

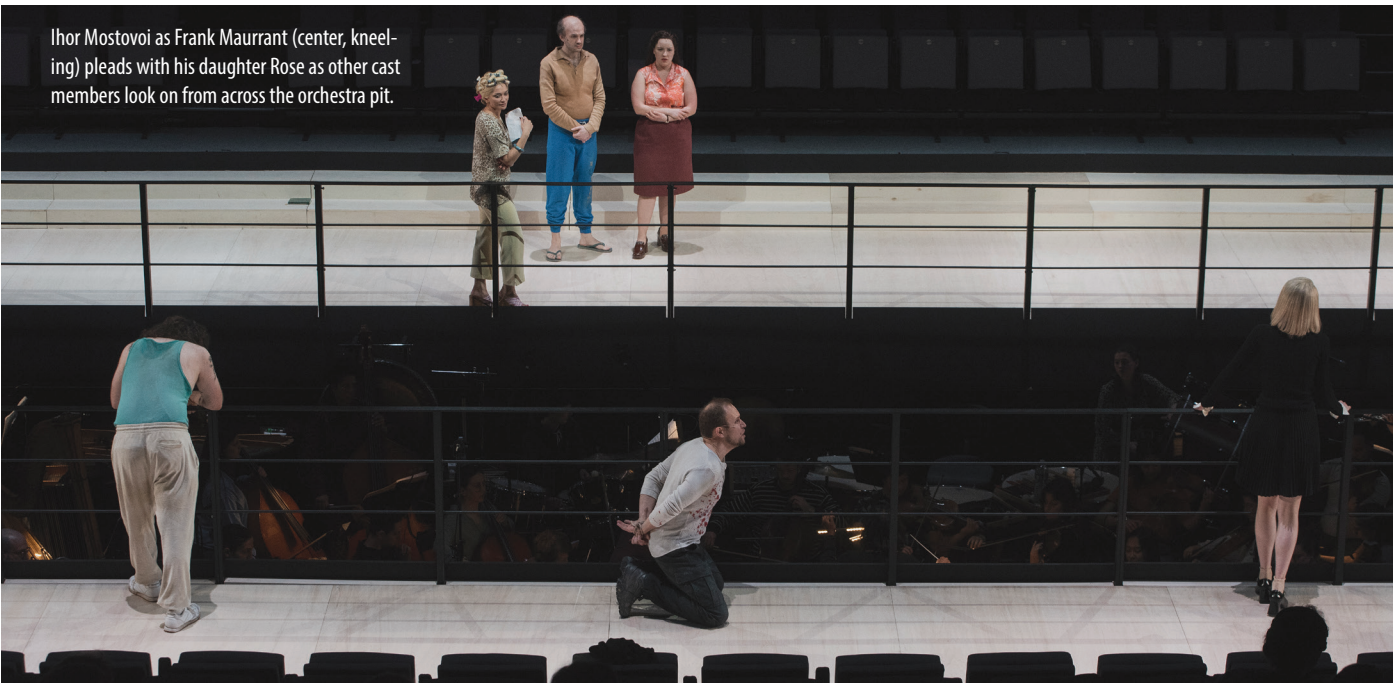
Ted Huffman is an actor’s director in the world of opera. He insists on making the characters human; he doesn’t want grand operatic gestures, he wants human gestures ... just not on the strong beats! Ted pushed against stereotypes to find complexity and ambiguity in each scene. For Harry Easter’s scene with Rose, he asked us to play the scene as if there were a real romantic interest and fire between us, rather than making Harry a predator and Rose his naïve victim. The tone of the dialogue changed from

aggressive to flirty, and the scene inhabited an ambiguous zone, where an imbalance of power between the two was colored by real romantic tension. Ted’s direction gave Rose more power because she was playing Easter even more than he was playing her. She was able to flirt with him, but she was also able to see right through him and say no. When we first started working on the scene, Ted pushed Teona and me to go all the way in the flirty direction and have fun enacting the attraction between us. As rehearsals continued, he textured some ugliness underneath the flirtiness, creating a truly ambiguous relationship, which made the scene much more dynamic and striking.

I will never forget the costume fittings for this show. Designer Astrid Klein wanted Easter to look like Brad Pitt. She and Ted both wanted Easter to be genuinely attractive to Rose, at least on the surface. These fittings were a blast, and Astrid totally nailed the character with a swooping wig with blond highlights and a very stylish, well-fitting costume. The character truly came to life with Astrid and her team’s beautiful work. The extremely minimal set consisted of a slightly lowered orchestra pit surrounded by a railing, the only real “set-piece” in the production, and a rectangular stage that surrounded the pit on all four sides. The audience sat along the longer sides of the rectangle, much closer to the stage than typical in an opera house. That drew the spectators directly into the action and contributed to the immersive realism of the piece, especially given Ted’s character-focused vision. The bodies in the space and their detailed interactions became the set itself.

We opened “Street Scenes” on 19 April to three rounds of encores! The performances crackedled with life as the energy of the orchestra met the passion of the cast. The run of five shows was a true explosion of artistic joy, as our collection of unique individuals from around the world became a family with the single purpose of performing Weill’s work with our whole hearts. For a handful of nights in Bobigny, the differences among us became one of our greatest assets, as our ensemble of varied backgrounds sang with one voice.

Jeremy Weiss



Ihor Mostovoi as Frank Murrant (center, kneeling) pleads with his daughter Rose as other cast members look on from across the orchestra pit.

PHOTO: VINCENT LAPPARTIENT



# Weill at Carnegie Hall

Carnegie Hall’s festival, “Fall of the Weimar Republic: Dancing on the Precipice” has drawn to a close. Naturally, Weill’s music figured prominently, from songs to symphonies, the most compelling concert among many being the fifteen-player version of *Die sieben Todsünden* performed by a dream team of Ensemble Modern, conductor HK Gruber, soloist Wallis Giunta, and vocal ensemble amarcord. Other significant performances include *Fantaisie symphonique* (Philadelphia Orchestra), *Symphonie in einem Satz* (the Knights), *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik* (the Met Orchestra), *String Quartet no. 1, op. 8* (Ensemble Connect), and evenings from solo artists including Justin Austin and Ute Lemper. In lesser quantities, Weill’s music made it onto some other programs as well.



The Met Chamber Ensemble performs *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik*

PHOTO: FAOIKHEIR

**Met Chamber Ensemble, 22 January 2024**  
*Kleine Dreigroschenmusik*

“With [J. David] Jackson again leading with spirit and energy to match the music, the ensemble launched into Weill’s suite titled *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik*. From the jangly overture followed a poignant feeling of poise, pleasure, and not a little regretful nostalgia, as each song was played with wonderful color and style. In the mind, one sang along with ‘Die Moritat,’ ‘Pollys Lied,’ ‘Kanonen-Song,’ and it was sheer joy to hear the ensemble playing through the tango and foxtrot rhythms with such savoir faire ...

George Grella, *New York Classical Review*, 23 January 2024



PHOTO: CHRIS LEE

**Philadelphia Orchestra, Yannick Nézet-Séguin (conductor), 23 January 2024**  
*Fantaisie symphonique*

“I really wish [Weill] would have composed much more for [symphony orchestra]. To me, and this is going to be a bold statement, I feel like his Symphony no. 2 is one of the great masterpieces of German music in the first third of the twentieth century. We all know there was Mahler, there was Schoenberg, there was Berg, but still, this piece is just a masterpiece of construction, of form. The duration is perfect, the proportions are perfect. Its melodic inspiration is extraordinary ... the rhythmic vitality is so infectious. ... it’s a very profound piece.”

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, interview with Melinda Whiting, 30 April 2024, WRTI radio





Christina Courtin and Alex Sopp perform the “Alabama-Song”

“Fortunately the Knights gave [the Symphonie in einem Satz] a strong performance that allowed Weill’s early flair for orchestration to shine. Colors were sharply delineated, electric energy corralled with gusto. The chorale-like quiet section sounded especially magnetic in context, and the viola soloist acquitted himself marvelously.”

Jon Sobel, [blogcritics.org](#), 4 March 2024

“Weill’s Symphony no. 1 followed the interval in broad strokes and deep, Mahlerian currents. It’s an impatient work that allowed the orchestra to display some bombast. ... what it lacks in arc, it makes up for with emotion, almost manically so, making for a strong showcase for The Knights.”

Kurt Gottschalk, [bachtrack.com](#), 3 March 2024



Ute Lemper in red evening attire, near the end of her program

“Throughout the performance, the fair-haired *chanteuse* changed costume from drab street musician attire, to black gown, jumpsuit, sexy red evening attire and ending with a long black somber covering jacket all while remaining on the stage—unbelievably peeling off one outfit after another. Her physical transformation was like that of a chameleon adapting to its environment—each time clad in clothing that represented the ensuing change of political and hence cultural attitude.”

Sharon Ellman, [broadwayworld.com](#), 11 February 2024



Justin Austin, 5 March 2024  
Songs from *The Threepenny Opera*, “Oh Captain! My Captain!”

“Many musical performances provide escapism for people who want to temporarily forget about the problems of the world. I think that’s wonderful! My recital, ‘Don’t Be Angry!’, will not be one of those performances.”

Justin Austin, [broadwayworld.com](#), 8 January 2024

“At the core of the program were songs by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht from *The Threepenny Opera*. ... Austin assumes the persona of Mack the Knife, London’s greatest and most notorious criminal and the anti-hero of *The Threepenny Opera*, to guide the audience through the program. Starting with ‘Mack the Knife,’ he lent panache to them all.”

Rick Perdian, [seenandheard-international.com](#), 9 March 2024



Max Raabe (center) with members of the Palast-Orchester

“It was truly as if theatergoers had fallen into a time warp and come out in Weimar Berlin, such was the overall feeling of the evening. ... As soon as he began to sing, Max Raabe had the patrons in the palm of his hand. This reviewer was overwhelmed by the happiness and joy of the music.”

Sharon Ellman, [broadwayworld.com](#), 24 March 2024



Fellows of Ensemble Connect (Frankie Carr at far left)  
String Quartet no. 1, op. 8

“Composed in 1923, Kurt Weill’s String Quartet no. 1 was the work that first brought him international attention. ... Cellist Frankie Carr repeated Weill’s famous maxim in introducing the piece: ‘I have never acknowledged the difference between serious music and light music. There is only good music and bad music.’ Carr quickly added that the String Quartet is one of the ‘good ones.’ It may not sound like the musical theater works that brought Weill fame, but his wit and daring are always evident.”

Rick Perdian, [seenandheard-international.com](#), 12 April 2024



Wallis Giunta as Anna I  
Ensemble Modern, HK Gruber (conductor), 12 April 2024 *Die sieben Todsünden* (fifteen-player version)

“Ensemble Modern’s concert on Friday was one of the festival’s few fully Weimar programs—and all the more compelling for that. ... Performed in a recent arrangement for reduced forces by HK Gruber, who conducted the concert, and Christian Muthspiel, this ‘ballet with singing’—a sung monologue about a fanciful journey through America, with ensemble interjections—was delightfully intimate and witty.

“The mezzo-soprano Wallis Giunta, joined by members of the vocal group amarcord, guided the audience through a parade of misadventure with a light, meticulous touch, neither too offhand nor too exaggerated—as bracing yet sweet as a shot of schnapps. ...

“If only the entire festival had been this fixed on its subject. For classical institutions seeking contemporary political relevance, there are few more appealing topics these days. (Just before the first pandemic lockdowns, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen put on their own multidisciplinary Weimar festival.) ... The Carnegie festival shies away from a clear, thorough reckoning even with the period’s music, making it harder to help us learn from Weimar where we are and where we might be going.”

Zachary Woolfe, *New York Times*, 14 April 2024



Mezzo-soprano Chrystal E. Williams sings “Pirate Jenny” from *The Threepenny Opera* with the American Composers Orchestra.



Meow Meow, 23 March 2024 **Weill Songs**  
Australian singer Meow Meow makes her Carnegie Hall debut with a program including five Weill songs.





# The Kurt Weill Foundation *hosts* Ensemble Modern

When Ensemble Modern came to town, the Foundation threw a party. The day before the momentous performance of the fifteen-player version of *Die sieben Todsünden* at Carnegie Hall (see review on p. 14), we invited members of the Ensemble, along with conductor HK Gruber—recipient of the Foundation’s Lifetime Achievement Award—singer Wallis Giunta, and members of the vocal ensemble amarcord, to stop by our office to meet the staff and view items of interest from our collections. That was followed by a short walk to the Players Club, where Foundation President Kim H. Kowalke hosted a reception in their honor. The event proved a hit. Foundation staff prepared exhibits having to do with *Die Dreigroschenoper*, *Die sieben Todsünden*, and the Kurt Weill Edition and showed visitors around the office. Our guests also viewed memorabilia and artwork; in one touching moment, Gruber encountered Weill’s Steinway upright. At the Players Club, Kowalke welcomed the group and offered a tour of the storied venue; Foundation staff and guests mingled on a balcony overlooking Gramercy Park.

Ensemble Modern’s long association with Weill’s music and longstanding collaboration with the Foundation have led to numerous performances and recordings and yielded definitive interpretations of several works, including *Die Dreigroschenoper*, *Mahagonny Songspiel*, *Chansons des quais*, and songs and short pieces, all under Gruber’s baton. Kowalke recruited Gruber to create a new orchestration of *Die sieben Todsünden* and has given it high praise: “I like to think it’s what Weill himself would have written for an ensemble of fifteen.” The Foundation helped make possible the group’s visit to the U.S. this year, which included performances in Houston and at Carnegie Hall—the New York premiere of the fifteen-player version. The latest: Ensemble Modern plans to record the entire concert program in January 2025; release date to be announced.



Conductor HK Gruber and Foundation President Kim Kowalke



Wallis Giunta poses in front of a photo of Anna II and Anna I from 1933



Archivist Dave Stein with Christian Fausch



KWF's Ed Harsh shows volume of Kurt Weill Edition

Group photo by the portrait of Lotte Lenya at the Foundation office:  
AT LEFT: Ensemble Modern Managing Director Christian Fausch, Wallis Giunta and her baby  
with members of Ensemble Modern (from left): Maximilian Dinies, David Haller, Jagdish Mistry, Michael Maria Kasper, Chihiro Ono, Christian Hommel, Sava Stoianov, Rainer Römer, and Foundation President Kim H. Kowalke



TOP LEFT: Kim Kowalke and Wallis Giunta climb the stairs during a tour of the Players Club  
BOTTOM LEFT: the ornate façade of the Players Club  
TOP RIGHT: Kowalke addresses guests at the reception  
SECOND FROM TOP RIGHT: the vocal ensemble amarcord: Robert Pohlers, Holger Krause, Frank Ozimek, Wolfram Lattke  
THIRD FROM TOP RIGHT: guests enjoy themselves in the reception room, which is lined with portraits of great actors  
BOTTOM RIGHT: Chihiro Ono, Rainer Römer, and Christian Fausch of Ensemble Modern



# Die sieben Todsünden

Ensemble Modern  
HK Gruber, conductor

12 April 2024

Carnegie Hall’s “Fall of the Weimar Republic: Dancing on the Precipice” festival has hosted performers and ensembles from around the world, with the goal of examining the explosion of new artistic ideas and forms that defined the tumultuous period in Germany from the end of World War I to 1933. One can hardly imagine a concert that better exemplifies the zeitgeist of that era than the program presented by Ensemble Modern in Zankel Hall, the main attraction of which was *Die sieben Todsünden* with mezzo-soprano Wallis Giunta and vocal ensemble amarcord, in the New York premiere of HK Gruber and Christian Muthspiel’s 2019 adaptation for fifteen players. Expertly conducted by Gruber, the playing by each of Ensemble Modern’s virtuoso musicians was by turns thrilling, precise, and achingly poignant, at all times stylistically spot on.

The evening began with Paul Hindemith’s Kammermusik Nr. 1 (1922). Although Hindemith’s Kammermusik compositions are often cited as examples of *Gebrauchsmusik* (music for use), this one presents a challenge for even the most accomplished musicians. Ensemble Modern glided through the score in a *tour de force* performance, highlighted by Matthias Stich’s mournful clarinet in the work’s slow movement.

Erich Korngold’s five-movement suite from his incidental music for a Max Reinhardt-directed production of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* (1918–19) followed, a work that pre-sages the film music for which Korngold became renowned when he moved to Hollywood in 1934. Ensemble Modern played the entertaining score with lightness and aplomb.

After intermission came Arnold Schoenberg’s twelve-tone *Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene* (1930), arranged for eleven players by Johannes Schöllhorn. Following soon after Schoenberg’s 1928 twelve-tone masterpiece *Variations for Orchestra*, the work might be expected to display a similar spiky density, but the transparency and delicacy of Ensemble Modern’s performance highlighted lyricism over compositional technique.

The featured presentation of the evening, a concert performance of *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1933), was an opportunity to hear the 2019 arrangement for fifteen players co-conceived by the Kurt Weill Foundation (this reduction differs from Weill’s original orchestration by eliminating one flute, one trumpet, tuba, one percussionist, harp, and reducing the string forces to five solo players). Although at times one missed the heft of the tuba, the support of the second trumpet, and the warmth and fullness of a large string section, the sense of the piece and Weill’s colorful orchestration were still very much present. Plaudits to the arrangers for a sensitive reduction that will allow companies with reduced budgets and orchestral forces to program the work.

Mezzo-soprano Wallis Giunta embodied Anna I to the fullest, dramatically as well as vocally. She was beguiling when nec-



Wallis Giunta as Anna I

essary, her voice enticingly silky, and confrontational when called for, when her voice transformed into a delightfully wicked Lenya-esque baritone. Her diction was flawless; one heard every consonant and round vowel. She has performed the work numerous times, and it showed in the confidence emanating from someone who has fully absorbed the nuances of the text and music. Although the male vocal quartet’s name, amarcord, is all lower case, there was nothing lower-case about the crisp, animated, and well-blended singing of the four members, Wolfram Lattke, tenor; Robert Pohlers, tenor; Frank Ozimek, baritone; Holger Krause, bass. The quartet was particularly effective in *Gluttony*, which is virtually *a cappella*, eliciting laughs from the audience in just the right places.

HK Gruber paced a memorable performance. We knew we were in for something special from the first two-clarinet upbeat, when he held the dotted eighth note just a bit, before releasing the clarinets’ fall into the downbeat, injecting a palpable sense of Weillesque wistful longing right from the beginning. One would also be remiss not to mention Gruber’s consummate command of the evening’s repertoire and precise conducting that nevertheless generously allowed each

individual musician to shine forth. Gruber’s conception of the program enveloped the evening. The audience’s appreciation was rewarded by two encores, Gruber himself singing, or rather deliciously growling, Hanns Eisler’s setting of Brecht’s “Ballad of the Water Wheel,” followed by a boisterous instrumental version of the “Kanonen-Song” from *Die Dreigroschenoper*. I left Zankel almost feeling transported to that challenging, decadent time in Germany 100 years ago, but also thinking the evening’s music might just as well reflect America in 2024. “Dancing on the Precipice,” indeed.

Gary S. Fagin  
New York



HK Gruber leads Ensemble Modern

BOTH PHOTOS: STEPHANE BERGER

# Der Silbersee

Nationaltheater Mannheim  
Calixto Bieito, director

Premiere: 10 December 2023

The following observation can almost be considered a general rule: If you attend an opera performance in Germany, the main venue is undergoing renovation, and performances take place in various alternative locations. Thus, *Der Silbersee* was presented in a former factory (Alte Schildkrötfabrik) located in a shopping and commercial area in a suburb of Mannheim. The venue complemented the piece effectively, providing an appropriate setting for this “winter fairy tale,” which highlights the divisions between rich and poor, and between consumer spending and collective solidarity. The production seemed to toy with the expectations of an audience that accepts the social criticism of Weill and Georg Kaiser but is already looking forward to the premiere of *Fledermaus* at one of the other alternative venues.

The hall forms an elongated rectangle in which a stylized catwalk had been set up as the stage. The audience sits along the two long sides of this catwalk, so that the action is sometimes physically very close, at other times almost invisible. On the one hand, Weill’s music fit these circumstances well because it depends on an analogous compromise; it is a mixture of traditional, almost romantic scoring and contemporary song styles. On the other, the music did suffer due to the configuration of the hall, beginning with the overture, during which the orchestral sound was deliberately obscured by rattling plastic garbage cans and choreographed homeless people.

The production took thorough advantage of the reduced but also expanded possibilities of a performance in a small (but almost entirely sold-out) hall. The audience is repeatedly dragged into the plot, especially through the figure of the lottery agent (Niklas Mayer), who became the master of ceremonies for the entire evening. He greeted the conductor, orchestra, and individuals in the audience, commented cynically on the action, and rotated a large lottery drum (whose sound, similar to a wind machine, helped to obscure the overture). The lottery agent also marked the starting point for references to other genres and repertoire pieces, with allusions both to *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Matrix* evoked by his bowler hat and sunglasses.

Calixto Bieito, known as an *enfant terrible* with a penchant for lurid splatter effects, kept his *Regietheater* in check in this cleverly thought-out and very entertaining production. Only the pineapple, central to the plot and here used extensively as a prop, and other foods were actually harmed. However, the connections between dialogue and music grew noticeably weaker after intermission, when the focus turned again to the wealth and poverty of the protagonists, specifically the exploited niece Fennimore, whose transformation into an ally of Olim and Severin makes little sense within the director’s concept, but was carried out very intensely by Mirella Hagen, especially during her dance of death, here ironically associated with Salome’s dance in Strauss’s opera.

Ultimately, every production of *Der Silbersee* is measured by its handling of the finale, in which the metaphor of the Silver



Patrick Zielke (Olim),  
Christopher Diffey  
(Severin), Mirella  
Hagen (Fennimore)

PHOTO: CHRISTIAN KLEINER

Lake brings together the extremes of poverty (drowning, as in *Wozzeck*) and wealth (miraculous survival in a new world). The performance succeeded in making both extremes tangible: projected video shows black-and-white images of poor people of the 1930s suffering in a wintry city, contrasted with idyllic images of a skating rink. At the end, the “fourth wall” that separates the performance venue from everyday life is broken one final and decisive time through the simplest possible contrast between spaces of warmth and cold: the interior of the theater, and the adjacent shopping mall parking lot, fully visible to the audience through the high windows of the Schildkrötfabrik. The three protagonists—Olim, Severin, and Fennimore—simply move to another world waiting for them at the edge of the stage, maybe warmer, maybe even colder.

The production integrates three numbers from other sources at appropriate points: “Kanonen-Song” (from *Die Dreigroschenoper*), “Bilbao-Song” (from *Happy End*), and, very touching with simple piano accompaniment, “Es regnet” (lyrics by Jean Cocteau). Deploying the “Kanonen-Song” as an entrance number lends greater scope to the central character, Officer Olim, who at first wounds Severin, but then develops compassion for his victim. Patrick Zielke made the transformation believable with impressive physical effort. In one scene with Severin (Christopher Diffey) in a wheelchair, the two came close to Laurel and Hardy slapstick; in other scenes the actors enacted musical rhythms directly through dance steps or coordinated movements.

The orchestra played on even during the ensemble’s well-deserved curtain calls; conductor Jürgen Goriup led an endless loop of instrumental dance pieces from the score. That gave the audience the opportunity to appreciate the musicians, visible throughout (no space for a pit in the old factory) but often deliberately relegated to the edge of audibility.

Julian Caskel  
Cologne