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The long-awaited German edition of Stephen Hinton’s monumental study of Weill’s stage works in particular. His byline has appeared on Weill’s birthday, 2 March, with the 35th Nuit des Molières, the French equivalent of the Tony Awards. The production, directed by Thomas Ostermeier and conducted by Maxime Pascal, attracted wide attention and played a long sold-out run in Paris. On 6 May, when the Molière awards were announced, it was revealed that Spanuoli took the Best Musical Award. Yet the nomination marks recognition from the French theater community of the efforts of all involved.

Bobby Darin’s only No. 1 hit, “Mack the Knife,” was finally certified platinum in December 2023 by the Recording Industry Association of America, meaning that it has sold or streamed one million copies. Actually, that number surely was reached long ago, but RIAA figures do not include sales from the 1950s and 1960s (Darin re-released the recording in 1959). Recognition has been long overdue for Darin as well as for “Mack”; this represents Darin’s first platinum certification for any recording, as it should, because it regularly heads online lists of his best songs.

Congratulations to Professor Maria Cristina Fava! Her first book, Art Music: Activism, Aesthetics and Politics in 1930s New York City, has come out this year from University of Illinois Press. Not surprisingly, Fava has a good deal to say about Blitzstein and The Cradle Will Rock, placing the work and its composer firmly in the context of Depression-era social and artistic upheaval, and spelling out his own role in creating and sustaining it.

The 2024 Kurt Weill Festival Dessau closed on 10 March with a program honoring Marc Blitzstein and the seventieth anniversary of the opening of his adaptation of The Threepenny Opera off-Broadway. Singer Stefanie Wüst and pianist Thomas Wise, longtime collaborators, presented a variety of Blitzstein’s songs and works for piano solo (including songs from Threepenny); Weill biographer and advocate Jurgen Scherba provided commentary. Wüst was also in the news recently as conductor of a production of Lady in the Dark in Basel (see the Spring 2023 Newsletter).

Rudolfo Wainwright returned to the well on Weill’s birthday, 2 March, with the Pacific Jazz Orchestra led by Chris Walden, to try out a revised version of his Weill program from last year’s residency at the Café Carlyle (see Spring 2023 Newsletter). The augmented set included “My Ship,” “Speak Low,” and “Zahntabbracherl,” and the switch from piano accompaniment to a thirty-plus-member ensemble has taken the program to another level. No word yet on the next performance of “Wainwright Does Weill.

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In Memoriam

Guy Stern (1922–2023)

Guy had worked tirelessly and written extensively for more than four decades to bring to fruition his own “Road to the Eternal Road.” The correspondence ignited Guy’s interest in the work, culminating in 1999 with the first stage production of the German-language version, which premiered in Chemnitz, then traveled to New York, New Israeli Opera, and Opera Krakow before being staged at Expo 2000 in Hanover and broadcast on German television.

Guy’s relationship with Lenya had started 25 years earlier. Having just finished his dissertation at Columbia, Guy wrote her to ask permission to include some letters by Weill in a reader intended for third-year German students. She sent him several exchanges between Weill, Franz Werfel, and Max Reinhardt concerning their collaboration on Der Weg der Verheißung, the huge Jewish pageant that aired in 2022. Earlier that year, Guy had been featured on CBS’s 60 Minutes as one of the few surviving Ritchie Boys—the German-born, predominantly Jewish young men who had enlisted in the U.S. Army, trained at Camp Ritchie in Maryland, and were subsequently responsible for an estimated sixty percent of “actionable intelligence” gleaned behind German lines during World War II. Guy landed in Normandy three days after D-Day and later earned a Bronze Star for his heroism. CBS broadcast the segment twice more that year, each time expanding its length until the Ritchie Boys occupied a full hour of prime time. Guy’s eyewitness accounts became ever more memorable and compelling.

After the war, Guy received a BA from Hofstra and a PhD in German studies at Columbia. His career as a university professor took him from Denison College to the University of Cincinnati (where he also served as dean of graduate studies), the University of Maryland, and finally Wayne State in Detroit, as Distin­ guished Professor and Provost. In retirement he accepted guest professorships at several German universities and continued to author or edit numerous books and anthologies and write dozens of articles about German literature, focusing increasingly on ex­ pats and immigrants. For his prolific and paradigmatic scholarly contributions, he was awarded the Grand Order of Merit and the Goethe Medal of the Federal Republic of Germany; for his heroism, the National Order of the Legion of Honor from the French Republic. Until his final illness, he served as director of the In­ ternational Institute of the Righteous at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Detroit.

Guy and I both joined the Foundation’s (until then largely inactive) Board of Trustees at Lenya’s invitation in 1980, along with Harold Prince and Julius Rudel. But Guy’s relationship with Lenya had started 25 years earlier. Having just finished his dissertation at Columbia, Guy wrote her to ask permission to include some letters by Weill in a reader intended for third-year German students. She sent him several exchanges between Weill, Franz Werfel, and Max Reinhardt concerning their collaboration on Der Weg der Verheißung, the huge Jewish pageant that would premiere in New York in 1937 as The Eternal Road. The correspondence ignited Guy’s interest in the work, culminating in 1999 with the first stage production of the German-language original, which premiered in Chemnitz, then traveled to New York, New Israeli Opera, and Opera Krakow before being staged at Expo 2000 in Hanover and broadcast on German television.

Guy had worked tirelessly and written extensively for more than four decades to bring to fruition his own “Road to the Eternal Road,” as he had titled his first scholarly paper on the topic.

World Symphony, an orchestra composed of top pre­professional musicians from around the U.S. Anna I is becoming a rite of pas­ sage for sopranos; every season, it seems, a new star sings it.

After both a concert and staged performance as Anna I, Dani­ elle de Niese visits Miami next fall to sing the role with the New­ ork Opera’s summer opera company will bring it back next season for live audiences, but as a triple bill with excerpts of Street Scene and The Seven Deadly Sins as well.

As theaters and opera companies announce their 2024–25 sea­ sons, news of upcoming productions has begun to filter in. We don’t have the complete picture yet, but several striking produc­ tions are in store:

Street Scene, Central City Opera, July 2024: 25 years after its first run at Street Scene, Colorado’s summer opera company will do it again. Daniel Pelzig directs, and Adam Turner, former Julius Rudel/Kurt Weill Conducting Fellow and veteran of Virginia Op­ eras’s Street Scene in 2018, conducts. Seven performances between 13 July and 3 August.

Die sieben Todsünden, New World Symphony, October 2024: After both a concert and staged performance as Anna I, Dani­ elle de Niese visits Miami next fall to sing the role with the New­ ork Opera’s summer opera company will bring it back next season for live audiences, but as a triple bill with excerpts of Street Scene and The Seven Deadly Sins as well.

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He and Lenya struck up a lifelong friendship. In the 1950s, she invited him to translate Mahagonny and Dreigroschenoper for the booklets of her landmark recordings. He wrote an article for The Theatre in 1959, “Woman with a Mission,” about “what she had done to keep Weill’s music alive.” Guy tapped her to record a selection of German poems from the Middle Ages through Brecht, they visited Germany together, she attended his son’s bar mitzvah. Her last public performance was in Detroit, climaxing a Weill evening Guy had organized at Wayne State.

After her death in 1981, Guy served as Secretary of the Board until 2009, when he was elected Vice Chair; a position he held until his elevation to Trustee for Life. Beyond writing about Weill and Lenya, his service had taken many forms. In 1990, his intensive advocacy and international diplomacy resulted in the first Weill festival, symposium, and exhibition in a newly reunified Germany. A few years later he helped to found the Kurt Weill Fest in Dessau, now an annual three-week event. A transplanted German-born American—like Weill—Guy was uniquely qualified to mentor and inspire all of us, trustees and staff alike. His wisdom enhanced our deliberations as much as his wit enlivened them. His passion for Weill’s music and his deep friendship with Lenya informed many of our efforts. At a standing-room-only memorial event at the Holocaust Memorial Center in April, Guy’s widow Susanna Piontek concluded the celebration of his life by showing how she imagined Guy himself might respond, with his characteristic upbeat take on things: “I exceeded my expiration date by more than twenty years. I was able to work until I was 100 years old. Don’t be sad that I am gone. Rather, be joyful that I was with you for such a long time.”

Guy was, and remains, a shining star, one that lit up the lives he touched. All who were privileged to fall within the gravitational pull of his orbit were indeed blessed.

Stephen Davis (1925–2024)

Marc Blitzstein’s nephew Stephen Davis passed away at age 98 on 27 February. A prominent corporate attorney, he had graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Penn in 1946 and Columbia Law School in 1952. After retiring as General Counsel for IBM Schroeder Bank and Trust in 1995, Stephen taught law at Roger Williams University for a decade.

In 1987 he and his brother Christopher had each inherited 50% of Blitzstein’s legacy from their mother, Josephine (Blitzstein–Davis). Stephen took the lead role in administering Blitzstein’s literary and musical rights. Having collaborated amicably and productively for a quarter century with the Foundation in co-licensing the Blitzstein version of The Threepenny Opera, in 2011 Stephen donated his share of Blitzstein’s literary and musical estate to the Foundation. At its annual meeting in December, the Board of Trustees voted to accept Stephen’s gift. In recognition of his generosity and confidence in entrusting Blitzstein’s works to the Foundation, the Board elected him an honorary trustee without term.

A warm, sage, friendly, and cultured person, Stephen leaves behind his wife of 68 years, Joyce, three children, seven grandchildren, and two great grandchildren. A life truly well lived.

Kim H. Kowalke

Sir Andrew Davis (1944–2024)

His last season at the helm of the BBC Symphony included “Berlin to Broadway: The Music of Kurt Weill” (January 2000), one of two London festivals honoring the composer’s centenary. The packed three-day event saw Davis conduct concert renditions of Weill’s early one-act operas Der Protagonist and Royal Palace and the operettas Der Kuhhandel and The Firebrand of Florence, not to mention an orchestral program that included Der neue Orpheus and Fantaisie symphonique (Symphony no. 2). He had conducted the symphony at least once previously, at the Britten-Weill Festival in Aldeburgh, October 1992. Davis not only displayed remarkable stamina, he delivered in musical terms as well. No less a Weill authority than Rodney Milnes lauded his “brilliant conducting of Firebrand in the Times of London; Tim Ashley of The Guardian judged Royal Palace “gloriously conducted.” Royal Palace and Firebrand were soon issued as live releases on the Ca- priccio label—in both cases world premiere recordings.

Kim H. Kowalke


Obituaries: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/17/world/europe/guy-stern-dead.html

https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/guy­stern­t9kkqq7n0

Winning a prize or award in the Competition is just the beginning for so many contestants who go on to steady careers in musical theater. Here is a sampling of recent and upcoming roles taken by former winners:

Brian Vu (2016) starred as Danny Chen in the New York premiere of An American Soldier at the Perelman Performing Arts Center.

Taylor-Alexis DuPont (2023) took leading roles as both Flora (La traviata) and Musetta (La bohème) at Florida Grand Opera in the 2023–24 season.


Michael Maliakel (2015) ends a three-year run as Aladdin on Broadway and stars in The Little Mermaid as Prince Eric at The Muny in July.


Megan Marino (2012), woman of many roles: as Elsa Schreadder in The Sound of Music at Houston Grand Opera, April 2024. Misha and two other parts in the world premiere of Jake Heggie’s Before It All Goes Dark presented by Music of Remembrance, May 2023; Anna in Der Rosenkavalier at Santa Fe Opera, summer 2024; Beggars Woman in Sweeney Todd at Utah Opera, October 2024.

Katrina Galka (2022) closed out her run in the title role of Lucia di Lammermoor at New Orleans Opera in March and made her debut at Utah Opera in May as the Charmeuse in Thais.

John Brancy (2018) filled the role of Al in MasterVoices’ revised concert version of The Grapes of Wrath, 17 April at Carnegie Hall.

Teresa Perrotta (2020) takes on Donna Anna in Don Giovanni at Santa Fe Opera, summer 2024.

Gan-ya Ben-gur Akselrod (2021) is featured in “The World of Hans Zimmer—A New Dimension,” an exhibition of the film composer’s work that began touring in March and will end in November.

Briania Elyse Hunter (2014) sang Mercédès in Carmen at the Metropolitan Opera, spring 2024.

Christopher Durang (1949–2024)

Durang emerged from the ferment of Yale’s Drama School of the 1970s, a time of several groundbreaking Weill productions. His close friendship with Sigourney Weaver formed during that time led to a cabaret act called “Das Lustiania Songspiel” that played off-Broadway (an audio recording has been posted on YouTube) and a memorable appearance on Saturday Night Live in 1986, in which Weaver and Durang performed a zany five-minute Weill-Brecht parody for a national audience.


https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/guy­stern­t9kkqq7n0

Kim H. Kowalke

Inspirating Achievements
We Laughed, We Cried, We Cheered: The 2024 Lenya Competition Finals

On Saturday, April 8, at Kilbourn Hall in Rochester, New York, Ana Karneža won the First Prize of $25,000. From glittering entrance to touching close, her extraordinary personalizations in four selections from Offenbach to ABBA left the whole house in joyful tears.

Two-time Tony Award-winning composer Jeanine Tesori, one of three final round judges, summed up Karneža’s impact on her evaluation sheet: “This Woman! Simply. Stunning.” Tesori, world-renowned soprano Nicole Cabell, and internationally acclaimed director-writer Tazewell Thompson made up this year’s judges’ panel—all esteemed artists whose careers mirror the values of the Competition.

Christian Mark Gibbs and Jason Zacher each claimed a Second Prize of $20,000. The panel selected two finalists for discretionary awards of $6,000: Joseph Sacchi, for Outstanding Vocal Achievement; and Queen Hezumuryango, for Outstanding Performance of a Contemporary Musical Theater Selection, “The Switch” by Julianne Wick Davis, from the Lenya Competition Songbook. Each remaining finalist received a prize of $3,000. Kendra Dyck, Ta’Nika Gibson, Rebekah Howell, Kaileigh Riess, and Logan Wagner. A total of $92,000 awarded to the ten finalists brings the Competition’s cumulative prize total to more than $1.6 million over the past quarter century.

Choosing songs and arranging their order, she says, was only partly impulsive: “I had to start and end with two songs I love and feel at home with.” She decided that her first number needed to be by Weill; she already knew “Bilbao Song.” She had also performed “I’m the Greatest Star” from Funny Girl and chose it as her closing number: “I had it in my back pocket,” she said.

Second Prize winner Christian Mark Gibbs says that choosing what to sing and arranging the pieces for dramatic effect within a performer’s allotted fifteen minutes is a challenge. “I love ‘Maria’ from West Side Story; it gave me a quiet opening. The aria from Tosca [‘E lucevan le stelle’] I originally thought was too ambitious, but when I tried it, I found that it was the perfect fit. The hardest to find was something from a musical after 1968 because the tenor repertoire is thin. I listened to a lot of songs; I had been singing ‘Let It Sing’ [from Violet] before I realized that it was what I was looking for.”

A Unique Competition

Other competitions focus on voice, but here contestants must present four works which create different characters. The guidelines require both singing and acting; such versatility of performance to contestants and audience alike.

The road to the final round began with an initial pool of 286 applicants representing 25 countries and 37 U.S. states. Twenty semifinalists went on to participate in a judging-coaching format unique to the Lenya Competition. Leading Broadway music director and conductor Andy Einhorn and eminent soprano and voice teacher Harolyn Blackwell narrowed the field to the final ten.

The final round—each contestant’s program presented in its entirety—remains available for streaming on demand: https://www.kwlradio.org/lenya-competition/2024finals

A UNIQUE COMPETITION

By Michael Lasser

Michael Lasser is a longtime host of NPR’s “Fascinatin’ Rhythm” and an expert on American popular song.

I haven’t missed the Competition’s finals since 2002, and the awards presentation is always a crowning moment. One year, the winner stuck out his arms and helicoptered across the stage. Last year, one of three First Prize winners climbed onto the stage and broke into a dance. Nothing quite that dramatic happened this year. When Kowalke called Ana Karneža’s name as First Prize winner, she greeted the audience with tears running down her cheeks. I was in tears, too. I don’t want to speak for an entire audience, but I find it hard to believe that I was the only one.

Only six hours earlier in the Eastman School of Music’s Kilbourn Hall, Karneža had whizzed onstage on a motorized scooter and launched into Weill and Brecht’s “Bilbao Song” (Happy End). Her finals program demonstrated her flair for comedy along with the capacity to break an audience’s heart; it also included an aria from La Périchole, “Someone Else’s Story,” a pretty bad song from Chess that she made heart-rending, and a show-stopping “I’m the Greatest Star” from Funny Girl.

Creating a Program

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A Unique Competition

Other competitions focus on voice, but here contestants must present four works which create different characters. The guidelines require both singing and acting; such versatility offers the greatest challenge to performers and the greatest satisfaction to audiences. This is live theater with little to fall back on except for a chair and a prop or two. At an opportune moment in his singing of “When Words Fail” from Shrek, Joseph Sacchi pulled a large sunflower from his pocket to underscore the song’s mix of poignancy and comedy. Ta’Nika Gibson wore a floral silk scarf that became a comforting shawl when she sang “What Good Would the Moon Be?” from Street Scene; later she held it as if it were an infant at her breast for “Your Daddy’s Son.”
Above: Prizewinners of the 25th Anniversary Lenya Competition, 2023
From left: Nyla Watson, Taylor-Alexis DuPont, Ryan Johnson, Celeste Rose, Jeremiah Sanders

TOP ROW: Rebekah Howell, Christian Mark Gibbs, Jason Zacher, Kaileigh Riess, Ta'Nika Gibson
BOTTOM ROW: Ana Karneža, Logan Wagner, Kendra Dyck, Joseph Sacchi, Queen Hezumuryango

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