

Wide World of Weill

The staging of Ersan Mondtag's production of *Der Silbersee* at Opéra national de Lorraine in April was conducted by Gaetano LoCoco, who was also involved with Ivo van Hove's production of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* at Opera Vlaanderen (2022). The rising star commented, "Weill was not just a visionary when it came to social and political questions, but through his music he also arrived at emotions that you simply cannot find anywhere else." His work drew praise from critic Peter Krause (concerti.de): "He made it clear that he had an inspired score in front of him, investing it with fluid yet precise dynamics and opulent tone colors."

Danielle de Niese has become the latest big-name soprano to essay Anna I in *Die sieben Todsünden*, and the future looks bright. This spring, she has appeared with the London Philharmonic for a concert performance (13 March) followed by a full staging in Bologna and Reggio Emilia under director Daniele Abbado. Come 19 October, de Niese takes up the role once again with the New World Symphony in Miami, conducted by Stéphane Denève. Her comment: "Recently I've been discovering some incredible female-vehicle pieces, and *The Seven Deadly Sins* is a real cracker!"



PHOTO: RYAN CLEMENS

Rufus 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 list included "My Ship," "Speak Low," and "Zuhälterballade," 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."

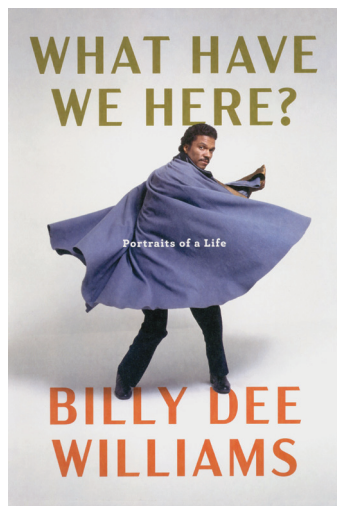


Birane Ba (Mac-heath) and Marie Oppert (Polly) in *L'opéra de quat'sous*

PHOTO: JEAN-LOUIS FERNANDEZ

Last season's blockbuster production of *L'opéra de quat'sous* at the Comédie-Française, imported from the Aix-en-Provence summer opera festival (see Fall 2023 *Newsletter*), drew a Best Musical ("Spectacle Musical") nomination for 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 *Spamalot* took the Best Musical award. Yet the nomination marks recognition from the French theater community of the efforts of all involved.

Billy Dee Williams recounts the dawn of his acting career in a new memoir, *What Have We Here?* (Knopf, 2024). It all started with Weill's 1945 Broadway operetta, *The Firebrand of Florence*, in which the seven-year-old Williams auditioned for, and won, the role of the Page. He recalls feeding lines to the Duchess, played by Lenya, when she forgot them. (Rehearsal pianist and swing Lys Symonette, who went on to work for Weill, Lenya, and the Foundation for decades until her death in 2005, recalled that she often sang the Page's short passages announcing the Duchess from the wings.) *Firebrand* was Weill's biggest Broadway flop, but there is a silver lining—without it we might have missed out on one of our greatest actors.



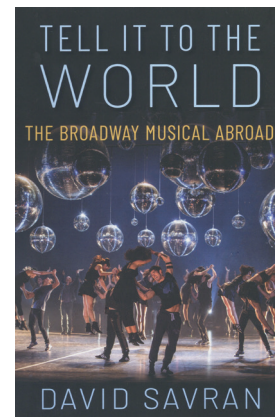
Bobby Darin's only No. 1 hit, "Mack the Knife," was finally certified platinum in December 2023 by the Recording Industry Association of America, meaning that it has sold or streamed one million copies. Actually, that number surely was reached long ago, but RIAA's figures do not include sales from the 1950s and 1960s (Darin released the recording in 1959). Recognition has been a long time coming, 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*, came out earlier 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 Fest 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 Jürgen Schebera provided commentary. Wise was also in the news recently as conductor of a production of *Lady in the Dark* in Basel (see the Spring 2023 *Newsletter*).

Giant Step for Weill Scholarship

The long-awaited German edition of Stephen Hinton's monumental study of Weill's stage work is published! *Kurt Weills Musiktheater. Vom Songspiel zur American Opera*, translated by Veit Friemert, appeared in December 2023 from Jüdischer Verlag, an imprint of Suhrkamp in Berlin. Launched by a lively and very crowded party at Suhrkamp's headquarters on 9 January, the book has already attracted quite a bit of attention; reviews have appeared in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Berliner Morgenpost*, *Perlentaucher*, *Rondo* magazine, *Die literarische Welt*, and *Theater der Zeit*, with some radio commentary as well. That's an impressive list when you consider that this 850-page scholarly tome has been out less than six months. The book has attracted universal acclaim, as illustrated by Professor Nils Grosch's judgment in the FAZ: "It represents an accessible trove of scholarly information, providing the means to explain and open up investigation of well-known and lesser-known works, and taking well-defined stands in scholarly and cultural-political debates. Hinton's clear language, directed to a broad public, is beautifully maintained in translation."



Shout-Out to Savran

Regular *Newsletter* readers have had numerous opportunities to admire David Savran's grasp of modern musical theater in general and of Weill's stage works in particular. His byline has appeared in each of the last four issues—twelve times since 2010—over reviews and review-essays covering a variety of approaches to Weill interpretation and performance. His latest book, *Tell it to the World: The Broadway Musical Abroad* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2024) pulls some of that work together in two extended sections titled "Kurt Weill 2022" and "Epilogue to the Weimar Republic." Savran discusses European productions of five Weill works—*Happy End* (Berlin, Renaissance-Theater), *Lady in the Dark* (Vienna Volksoper), *Die Dreigroschenoper* (Berliner Ensemble), *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (Berlin, Komische Oper), and *Der Silbersee* (Opera Vlaanderen)—in one season (four of them reviewed in the *Newsletter*) as a way to "detail how the works are used as vehicles for thinking about the political potential of music theatre in 2022" (p. 223). The analysis is informed, sharp, and open-ended; Savran wisely eschews grand conclusions in favor of persistent, difficult questions.



Ascendant Star in Berlin

Joana Mallwitz, music director of the Berliner Konzerthausorchester, followed up her debut with the orchestra last fall—which featured Weill's *Symphonie in einem Satz*—in early February with performances of the *Fantaisie symphonique* and *Die sieben Todsünden*, the latter with vocalist Katharine Mehrling. Both Mallwitz and Mehrling received plaudits from the press: "Mallwitz fired up the audience with a style as carefully considered as emotionally moving—pointed, inexorable, and blindingly clear, as if illuminated by lightning" (klassik-begistert.de, 3 February 2024); "Mehrling bewitched us with the carefully gauged savagery in her voice, combined with her stage presence" (kultura-extra.de, 3 February 2024). Mallwitz's debut recording with Deutsche Grammophon, due out in August 2024, features all three Weill works with the Konzerthausorchester and Mehrling.

Mickey vs. Mackie

Much has been made of copyright expirations at the beginning of 2024, as the original Mickey Mouse cartoon film "Steamboat Willie" and the German piano score and libretto of Weill, Brecht, and Hauptmann's *Dreigroschenoper* have entered public domain. (That does not mean that *Threepenny* as we know it is entirely up for grabs; the situation is much more complicated, as explained in the Fall 2023 *Newsletter*.) Only the editors of *American Theatre* have done something about it, in their ingenious mashup of the two wildly different cultural milestones. "Threepenny Mickey," a "pop opera hybrid," features Mick the Knife, Pete-chum, and Pirate Minnie, and music from the Disney cartoon to supplement Weill's score. Quoting the producer: "We think audiences will be surprised how well these two contrasting pieces of IP complement each other."

Don't get too excited yet, though; the whole thing was nothing more than an April Fool's joke. Congratulations to the clever folks at *American Theatre* for pursuing a portentous chronological coincidence to its logical conclusion. Search "threepenny mickey" on americantheatre.org to find it.

Own Your Own Detwiler

The Foundation possesses approximately ninety oil paintings created by Russell Detwiler, Lotte Lenya’s third husband. They wed on 2 November 1962 in London, where Lenya had been appearing in *Brecht on Brecht*. Lenya fell into a period of profound mourning after Detwiler died on 30 October 1969. He is buried near her in Mount Repose Cemetery in Haverstraw, New York.

Detwiler was born in Pennsylvania on 7 February 1925 and studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Between 1959 and 1969, he had a number of exhibits and one-man shows, in New York and elsewhere. Lenya arranged a posthumous exhibition at the LeMoyne Foundation in Tallahassee, Florida in 1972 that focused on work inspired by Weill and Lenya. That exhibit, successful as it was, brought tragedy in its wake when two of the paintings—*Surabaya-Johnny* and *The Seven Deadly Sins*—were stolen from a delivery van in New York City; Lenya said, “They took the two closest to my heart.” (The paintings have never been recovered.)

A number of Detwiler’s paintings drew inspiration from Lenya’s interpretations of Weill’s music. Yet his work ranged widely across portraits, still lifes, landscapes, and cityscapes.

The Foundation is trying to “find a good home” (as Detwiler himself put it) for most of the paintings, through sale or donation. We welcome any and all inquiries, leads, and suggestions that might help us find interested recipients or purchasers. Please see <https://www.kwf.org/russell-detwiler-paintings/>



Lenya as Mother Courage



“Member of a Wedding”



“Jenny’s Shoes”

PHOTOS: MIKE GERARD

Next Season Takes Shape

As theaters and opera companies announce their 2024–25 seasons, news of upcoming performances has begun to filter in. We don’t have the complete picture yet, but several striking productions 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 Opera’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, Danielle de Niese visits Miami next fall to sing the role with the New World Symphony, an orchestra composed of top pre-professional musicians from around the U.S. Anna I is becoming a rite of passage for sopranos; every season, it seems, a new star sings it.

Love Life, Opera North, January 2025: The stalwart company based in Leeds, U.K. gave the European premiere of *Love Life* back in 1996; next season they return to the scene of the crime with a semi-staged production conducted by James Holmes, one of the world’s pre-eminent Weillians, and directed by Matthew Eberhardt.

Love Life, Encores!, 26–30 March 2025: Theater lovers were stunned in March 2020 when the long-awaited Encores! performance of *Love Life*, starring Kate Baldwin and Brian Stokes Mitchell and directed by Victoria Clark, was abruptly swept aside by COVID. Broadway mavens have had few opportunities to see

this well-known but little-understood show and took it personally when theaters closed at exactly the wrong moment. The cast has not been announced, but Clark, fresh off her Tony-winning turn as the title character in *Kimberly Akimbo*, will direct.

Der Protagonist, Teatro La Fenice, May 2025: Weill’s first operatic success, this one-act work (libretto by Georg Kaiser) comes to Venice with Weill maven Markus Stenz on the podium; Ezio Toffolutti directs.

Die sieben Todsünden/Mahagonny Songspiel/Happy End, Teatro alla Scala, May 2025: Director Irina Brook and conductor Riccardo Chailly teamed up in Milan during the pandemic (March 2021) to present a streamed double bill of *Die sieben Todsünden* and *Mahagonny Songspiel*, starring Kate Lindsey and Lauren Michelle (Lenya Competition First Prize, 2015). They will bring it back next season for live audiences, but as a triple bill this time, “enriched” with songs from *Happy End*. Lindsey will not return, but Michelle is due back to resume her roles as Anna II (*Sins*) and Jessie (*Mahagonny*); she will join the cast of *Happy End* as well.

One Touch of Venus, Theater Flensburg, May 2025: Weill’s Broadway shows continue their conquest of Germany with this new production by Hendrik Müller, conducted by Sergi Roca Bru.

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny, Deutsche Oper Berlin, July 2025: Not since 2005 has *Aufstieg* appeared at Deutsche Oper, in a revival of Günter Krämer’s production. A new production by Benedikt von Peter is in the offing, conducted by Stefan Klingele. Only four years after Barrie Kosky’s acclaimed staging at the Komische Oper, Berlin waits to see how Peter will respond.

In Memoriam

Guy Stern (1922–2023)

At its annual meeting in December 2021, just four weeks shy of Guy’s 100th birthday, the Foundation Board elected him its first and only Trustee for Life. We also surprised him with the presentation of “Pages from a Scrapbook” (photo at right), a chronicle of his nearly seventy-year association with Lenya, Weill, and the Foundation, which would soon appear as the centerpiece of a 700+-page *Festschrift* honoring the centenary of his birth. We raised our glasses in a toast to our friend, colleague, and mentor: “Survivor, Soldier, Hero, Scholar, Professor, MENSCH!”

Survivor was, of course, the *sine qua non* for his extraordinary life. Born in Hildesheim, the oldest of three children, Günther (who changed his name to Guy in 1942) was sent at age fifteen to his aunt and uncle in St. Louis in order to escape the fate awaiting the rest of his family. He would never see them again or learn how they perished. As he confessed in his 2020 autobiography, *Invisible Ink*, “if you were saved, you got to show you were worthy of it.” He had demonstrated that worth indisputably and continuously throughout his career and life.

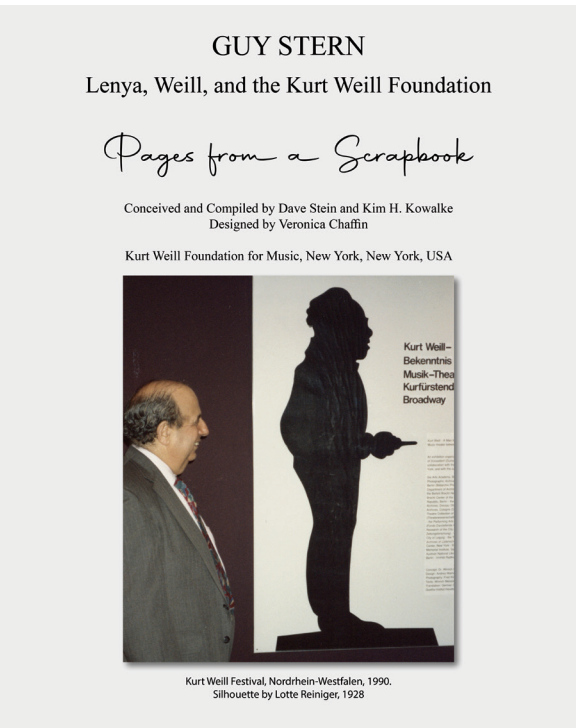
In his final years, Guy’s family name, the German word for “star,” became prophetic. Interviewed by Ken Burns in 2020 at age 98, Guy’s recollections and reflections anchored each of the three episodes of the six-hour PBS documentary *The U.S. and the Holocaust*, which aired in 2022. Earlier that year, 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 telling.

After the war, Guy received a BA from Hofstra and a Ph.D. in German studies at Columbia. His career as a university professor



PHOTO: COURTESY OF SUSANNA PIONTEK STERN

Guy Stern, former President of Germany Richard von Weizsäcker, and Kim H. Kowalke, Chemnitz, 1999



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 Distinguished 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 exiles 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 International Institute of the Righteous at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Greater 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.

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 sharing 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.

Kim H. Kowalke

Complete scrapbook:
<https://www.kwf.org/wp-content/uploads/Eminent-Scholar-and-Weill-Foundation-Lifetime-Trustee-Guy-Stern-Dies-at-101.pdf>

Obituaries:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/17/world/europe/guy-stern-dead.html>
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/guy-stern-t9kkqg7n0>

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 IBJ Schroder 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* “glowingly conducted.” *Royal Palace* and *Firebrand* were soon issued as live releases on the Capriccio label—in both cases world premiere recordings.

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 Lusitania 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.

Inspiring Achievements

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.



Cooper Grodin (2010) as Juror #11 and Curtis Bannister (2017) as Juror #8 teamed up in the world premiere production of *12 Angry Men: A New Musical* at Asolo Repertory Theater, Sarasota, May–June 2024.

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.

Nkrumah Gatling (2018) played Nicely Nicely in *Guys and Dolls* at Drury Lane Theatre in Illinois.



Megan Marino (2012), woman of many roles: as Elsa Schraeder 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 2024; Annina in *Der Rosenkavalier* at Santa Fe Opera, summer 2024; Beggar 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 *Thaïs*.

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,” a celebration of the film composer’s work that began touring in March and will end in November.

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





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

On Saturday, 4 May, at Kilbourn Hall in Rochester, New York, Ana Karneža won the First Prize of \$25,000. From glittering entrance to touching close, her extraordinary personifications 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.

Before the awards ceremony, four Competition alumni prizewinners returned to Kilbourn Hall for a performance of highlights from their illustrious careers in musical theater and opera, with Ted Chapin as emcee. Analisa Leaming (2007), Rebecca Jo Loeb (2008), Michael Maliakel (2015), and Jacob Keith Watson (2012) provided examples of seasoned, professional 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.kwf.org/lotte-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 Kim and the judges, and then turned to 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

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 from 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 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" from *Ragtime*.



FACING PAGE: First Prize Winner Ana Karneža performs "I'm the Greatest Star" (*Funny Girl*)

ABOVE (clockwise from top left): Christian Mark Gibbs, Jason Zacher, Queen Hezumuryango, Joseph Sacchi (photos by Michael Sherman)



STANDING: Competition Judges Jeanine Tesori, Tazewell Thompson, Nicole Cabell
SEATED: Top Prizewinners Christian Mark Gibbs, Ana Karneža, Jason Zacher

PHOTO: YUIEN TSAI

THE KURT WEILL FOUNDATION FOR MUSIC, INC.

7 East 20th Street

New York, NY 10003-1106

USA

Lotte Lenya THE LENYA COMPETITION *2024!*

WATCH NOW!



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

kwf.org/LLC