

Kurt Weill Newsletter

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KURT WEILL
In his time...*and ours*

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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ON THE COVER: Kurt Weill photographed in 1935, reimagined in 2025. The fragmented, colored portrait nods to the past and illuminates the present—much like Weill's compositions, which bridge his turbulent era with our own in an enduring artistic dialogue.



Editor's Note



We resume our measurement of Weill's stature in this anniversary year, portentous not only because it marks the 125th anniversary of his birth and the 75th of his death, but because of local, national, and world events. It seems that Weill would feel right at home in today's tempestuous landscape, as war, oppression, and demagoguery continue their march around the globe. It follows that Weill's works should speak to our time, and we tested that proposition by inviting a diverse group of experts to choose a single stage work, concert work, or song and explain how it informs our comprehension of today's world. The sheer variety and acuity of their answers make the case.

There's more, of course. Jürgen Thym digests a rich selection of current Weill scholarship, and the review section evaluates four major performances from the first half of 2025, with coverage of the renaissance of *Love Life* taking pride of place. (The piano-vocal score is published, and a complete recording is coming soon!) We offer our usual news, including a report on the recent Lenya Competition Finals, in which every winner hailed from outside the U.S.

My gratitude goes to all of my colleagues, who have played indispensable roles in this issue, and to our Art Director Mike Gerard.

Dave Stein



LAST CALL!

Soon we will determine whether to continue to print the *Kurt Weill Newsletter* or move to online only. We have asked readers to voice their preferences, and we thank all who have answered for their well-considered and sometimes passionate responses. Your opportunity to make your wishes known is coming to a close. Please write to newsletter@kwf.org no later than 30 September to help us reach a decision.

CELEBRATING LENYA LAUREATES



Michael Maliakel as Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*
Photo Credit: Evan Zimmerman for MurphyMade

Past Lenya Competition prizewinners continue to scale the heights of musical theater. Two are now holding down leading roles on Broadway: Christian Douglas (2018) making his debut as Christian in *Moulin Rouge*; and Michael Maliakel (2015), after three years as Aladdin, portraying Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*.

Three former winners, all from outside the U.S., are making their marks on European opera stages: Gemma Nha (2025) plays an extraordinary five roles at Vienna's Volksoper during the 2025–26 season: Maria in *West Side Story*, Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte*, Adele in *Fledermaus*, Wendla in *Spring Awakening*, Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro*. Barrie Kosky's production of *Sweeney Todd* features two past winners: Tom Schimon (2016) as Toby at Komische Oper; Marie Oppert (2020) took over the role of Johanna after the production moved to Opéra national du Rhin.

The Foundation has sponsored two former winners as Weill-Lenya Artists during the past season: Justin Hopkins (2012) stopped the show with "Love Song" in Opera North's *Love Life* (see review on p. 20); and Victoria Okafor (2021) garnered accolades in *Blind Injustice* presented by MasterVoices in February 2025.

BROADWAY

EUROPEAN OPERA

WEILL-LENYA ARTISTS

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In his time *and ours*

Which Weill work—stage, concert, or song—speaks most pointedly to the present historical moment?

Kurt Weill possessed an uncanny ability to capture the pulse of his time while creating works that have transcended their original contexts. In 1929 he articulated a goal that would guide the bulk of his efforts thereafter: “If we succeed in finding a musical language which is just as natural as the language of the people in modern theater, it is also possible to deal with the monumental themes of our time with purely musical means in the form of opera.” His works for the stage do indeed reflect the unprecedented upheavals of his all-too-short career: the rise of fascism, economic collapse, war,

revolution, ethnic and racial hatred. His commitment to addressing contemporary issues that resonated with his audiences traveled with him from Europe to the U.S. “I write for today,” he declared in 1940. Nevertheless, his works continue to speak across generations, demonstrating their durability while finding new relevance to each era’s struggles and aspirations.

To celebrate Weill’s timeliness and topicality 125 years after his birth, we asked a group of distinguished professionals to answer the question printed above.



1928 Weill’s setting drives home a key theme of *Die Dreigroschenoper*: the poor are exploited by the rich. Like *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728), it mixes criminals with the bourgeoisie to show that both are motivated by greed.



1929 From *Das Berliner Requiem*, Brecht’s anti-war poems set by Weill as a radio cantata. Right-wing Germans perceived it as an attack, and it wasn’t heard again for years. The “drowned girl” may refer to Rosa Luxemburg. Painting: “Found Drowned” by George Frederic Watts



1930 Final scene from the world premiere in Leipzig. Nazi demonstrations disrupted the performance and culminated in a riot. The second performance took place with the house lights up to prevent further unrest. Under political pressure, many opera houses elected not to produce the work.



1932 Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Party won 38 per cent of the vote and 230 Reichstag seats in Germany’s federal elections about five months after the premiere of *Die Bürgschaft*. Weill’s opera (libretto by Caspar Neher) was an impassioned protest against authoritarianism.

Die Dreigroschenoper (1928)

I’m picking the obvious piece, Weill’s most famous and influential stage work. Brecht, Weill, and Hauptmann’s adaptation of *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728) will soon turn 100. Its fat-cat tycoons, corrupt officials, and gentleman cutthroats still entertain, offend, and challenge—as recent productions in London, Berlin, and Paris have confirmed. While the poor starve and suffer from disease and war globally, the timely admonition from the second Finale should ring out: “Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral.”

Kim H. Kowalke
President of the Foundation

Ballade vom ertrunkenen Mädchen (1929)

I choose the quiet holy dissonance of “Das Ballade vom ertrunkenen Mädchen” (The Ballad of the Drowned Girl from *Das Berliner Requiem*). To me it beats (or flows) like a subliminal thrum through our current events—all the bodies quietly lost, disintegrated, forgotten by history and God, but with nature somehow still magnificently witnessing our demise, and greater than all of us.

Meow Meow
Singer, actress

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny (1930)

In *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, having too little money is the greatest possible crime, and Jimmy Mahoney is sentenced to death because he doesn’t have enough to pay his bills. The inherent biting criticism couldn’t be more apt today in a country where callous billionaires determine the fate of international welfare programs and million-dollar-a-plate dinners buy presidential pardons.

Thomas Wise
Musical Director, Theater Basel

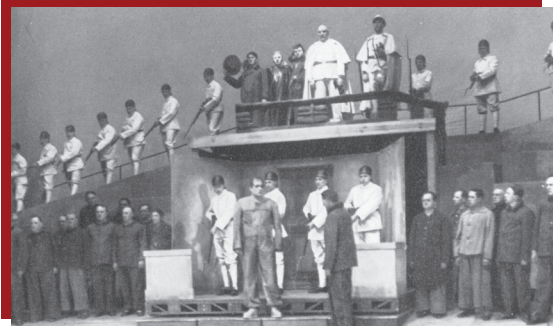
Die Bürgschaft (1932)

It doesn’t take much thought: *Die Bürgschaft* is as topical now as then, a year before Hitler took power in Germany. Deeply divided societies, autocrats on the rise, “special envoys” dispatched by the great powers, warfare everywhere. The opera’s final lines sum it up: “Everything proceeds under one law. The law of money. The law of power.” Every report from Kyiv, Gaza, Beirut should be accompanied by Weill’s “Barbaric March” from Act III.

Jürgen Schebera
Cultural historian, Brecht scholar, Weill biographer

Die Bürgschaft offers a striking chronicle of the development from liberal to proto-fascist to totalitarian society. The opera analyzes a nation that is splitting apart, with corresponding destruction of families and friendships. Tyranny, corruption, and unchecked power dominate where humanity is suppressed and reason is under suspicion—true in many parts of the world in 1932 as in 2025.

Nils Grosch
Professor of Musicology, University of Salzburg



1932 Act II: After a lawsuit, friends Orth and Mattes face retrial under a totalitarian regime led by a merciless Commissar obsessed with money and power. Dissent is crushed; corruption, war, and famine beset the nation.



1933 The premiere date for *Der Silbersee* was set well before Hitler was appointed Chancellor. Despite grave risks, three theaters staged it anyway. It contained “Ballad of Caesar’s Death,” targeting Hitler’s dictatorial aims, which resulted in the work being banned within a few weeks.



1933 Jews were terrorized from the beginning of the Nazi regime. Weill left Germany on 21 March 1933, warned that the Gestapo was coming for him. He fled to Paris with one suitcase, assuming Hitler’s regime wouldn’t last long. Within two weeks, Weill had a commission to compose a ballet for Balanchine.



1933 *Die sieben Todsünden* (Seven Deadly Sins), a satirical “ballet with singing,” defines sin as actions that hinder the pursuit of wealth. It was Weill’s first composition in exile and his last collaboration with Brecht and Neher. Weill did not see it performed again or published.

Die Bürgschaft (1932)

Topicality was a double-edged sword for Weill. While his music speaks pointedly to its time, he advised against “constructing themes of contemporary relevance valid only for the briefest period” (“Zeitoper,” 1928). Today, in a historical moment destabilized by extreme divisiveness, *Die Bürgschaft* feels disquietingly timely: its vision is bleak, yet it still offers a glimmer of collective hope—a testament to the composer’s enduring belief in humanity against the odds.

Stephen Hinton
Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities,
Stanford University

Der Silbersee (1933)

Nineteen days after Hitler was appointed Chancellor, Weill’s *Der Silbersee* was premiered in three German cities despite Nazi protests. It is filled with homeless masses, larcenous villains, and murderous class warfare, with its two heroes finally cast out into the cold to die, rescued only at the last by Weill’s most radiant and impossible *deus ex machina*, which announces: we must continue the struggle and not give up hope.

David Savran
Distinguished Professor of Theatre,
CUNY Graduate Center

Der Silbersee

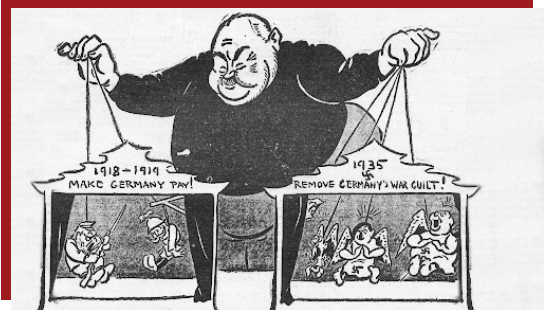
With *Der Silbersee*, Weill and Kaiser created a daring artistic statement that defied the political climate of their time. The opera’s suppression by the Nazis makes it a powerful reminder of the need to preserve artistic freedom and celebrate creativity that challenges oppression. But reviving *Der Silbersee* today is not just an act of remembrance; it is a call to action—a reminder that art can illuminate pathways to understanding, compassion, and change.

Lawrence Edelson
General director, Chicago Opera Theater

Die sieben Todsünden (1933)

The answer is simple: *Die sieben Todsünden*! And if a second piece, it would be *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*.

HK Gruber
Composer, conductor, chansonnier



1935 A cartoon from *The Daily Mail* in support of German rearmament and the Nazi government. *Der Kuhhandel* (libretto by Robert Vambéry) was first performed in London, adapted as “A Kingdom for a Cow.” It was a satire on the arms trade and manipulation of government by private interests.



1937 Scene from Act II: Moses kills the Egyptian taskmaster. A biblical spectacle on a mammoth scale, *The Eternal Road* was directed by Max Reinhardt, with text by Franz Werfel. The plot juxtaposes Old Testament stories with a modern community of Jews taking shelter from a pogrom.



1938 In the final scene, would-be dictator Pieter Stuyvesant orders his council to hang the rebel Brom Broeck, who has flouted his authority. When the councilmen refuse to do so, they exemplify what would become a definitive American trait: resistance to tyranny.



1934 & 1946 Originally composed as a tango in 1934 for *Marie galante*, this piece became “Youkali” when Roger Fernay added lyrics describing a fictional paradise at the end of the world. The song captures universal themes of yearning for escape, hope, and refuge.

Der Kuhhandel (1935)

Der Kuhhandel. My desert island Weill piece. The Rainbow Bridge from Berlin to Broadway. It’s almost always presented as a grotesque caricature. But if you want to see puffed-up man-children stuck in a political Punch-and-Judy show. Or the systematic crushing and corruption of decent people trying to earn an honest crust. Or naked greed pulling the puppet strings of politics, and of war... Just turn on the news. But careful which channel you choose.

Jeremy Sams
Librettist, composer, director, translator

Der Weg der Verheißung (1937)

Der Weg (The Eternal Road) reminds us of why the Jewish state exists despite waves of anti-Semitism and opposition to the current government of Israel. The fundamental *raison d'être* for Israel is the same as that of *Weg*. Additionally, the score shows Weill’s mastery of his German heritage and is the link between Berlin-Weill and Broadway-Weill, and, as such, is a tribute to the United States and the fruits of immigration.

John Mauceri
Grammy & Tony Award-winning conductor

Knickerbocker Holiday (1938)

Although Maxwell Anderson wrote *Knickerbocker Holiday* as a statement about Franklin D. Roosevelt, it parallels modern Washington more closely. Seeking to execute a “commoner” to demonstrate strength; Trump’s deporting random immigrants. Stuyvesant’s esteem for Brom and Tienhoven’s disrespect for authority parallels how Trump has chosen his cabinet. Blithely separating young couples? Trump detains Mahmoud Khalil when his wife is about to give birth. Stuyvesant’s fondness for much younger women? Enough said. “Nowhere To Go But Up” indeed.

John McWhorter
Associate Professor of Linguistics,
Columbia University

Youkali (1946)

Youkali, the land where promises forever endure,
Youkali, the land where love is always sacred and pure.
That sweet release for which everybody longs and prays,
A world at peace which we long to see in better days.
Youkali, the paradise our hearts desire,
Youkali, where hope burns with eternal fire.
But it’s a dream that cannot be,
There never was a Youkali.

(English by Jonathan Eaton)

Michael Morley
Professor Emeritus of Drama, Flinders University



1947 Sam and Rose (center) with the full cast in front of their tenement house, a microcosm of urban life. Tensions are always simmering among the residents of the building, which Weill called “a prison for the spirit.”



“Lonely House” (lyrics by Langston Hughes) reflects on isolation, discontent, and difficulties of making human connections in a bustling and crowded urban environment. Weill suggested to Hughes that “it could almost become a theme song for the show.”



1948 The Divorce Ballet (pictured above) marks the end of Sam and Susan Cooper’s 150-year marriage, broken up by economic pressures. The couple starts off in 1791, and we follow their relationship through American history, buffeted by social and cultural upheaval.



Weill and Lenya’s wedding photo, Berlin, 1926. Their marriage had its ups and downs, like Sam and Susan’s, and also suffered from shocks and turmoil in the wider world. After a divorce in 1933, they remarried in 1937.

Street Scene (1947)

Street Scene highlights a part of the American story that feels as present to me today as it did in 1946. Weill, Rice, and Hughes conjured a neighborhood that was and is a microcosm of America, seething with unexamined prejudices that are mitigated only in the wake of tragedy. As the U.S. continues to reckon with similar hostilities, I pray that we can find a peaceful way to break the devastating cycle.

Francesca Zambello
Artistic Director, Washington National Opera

Lonely House (*Street Scene*)

I was listening to “Lonely House” (*Street Scene*) the other night, and I thought, well, here we are. The lyric “Funny, with so many neighbors, how lonely it can be!” sang out to me. Not because it was marked *forte* in dynamic, but because of the paradox that our society has such sophisticated communication technology but we have never been so disconnected. I find solace in the early, early morning, when the loneliness inside matches the world.

Jeanine Tesori
Award-winning Broadway and opera composer,
Foundation trustee

Love Life (1948)

Dispossessed people took center stage in Weill’s theater; right now, more and more of us are in danger of finding ourselves in that same spotlight. Progress in the digital age happens with frightening speed, compelling an instant, often unconsidered response. The analog virtues of consideration, understanding, and empathy are left ever further behind. In 1948, *Love Life* prefigured where such a path might lead—its re-emergence today couldn’t be more timely.

James Holmes
Conductor; Kurt Weill Lifetime Achievement Award

Love Life

The illusions of capitalism and their impact on relationships are the subject of Weill and Lerner’s *Love Life*, and, despite how the work’s gender messaging has aged since 1948, their critique still packs a hefty punch. I’ve kept returning to Susan and Sam’s time-traveling love story since I saw Opera North’s production this year, particularly its advocacy for vulnerability, hope, and for recognizing human frailty—a balm for a time of polarized and angry politics.

Emily MacGregor
Visiting Fellow, King’s College, London

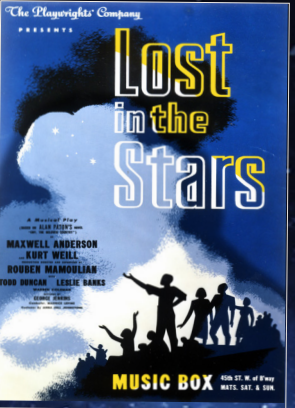
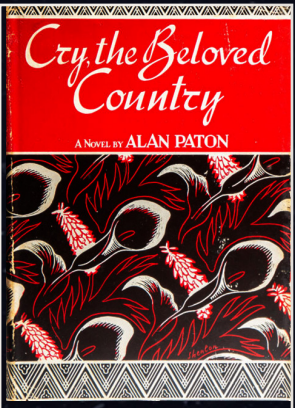


Photo: Karger

Lost in the Stars (1949)

Of all of Weill’s works that I have conducted, *Lost in the Stars* has had the most profound impact. The moral clarity and burning passion for justice that mark the best of Weill shine as brightly today as when the show first opened on Broadway three-quarters of a century ago.

Jeffrey Kahane
Music Director, San Antonio Philharmonic

As political and social battles play out in national and international courts, I find myself thinking of Weill’s fascination with trials and justice. This meditation from *Lost in the Stars* strikes me as especially relevant: “And all that could be said / For or against was said / And the books were balanced / And two, not one, were dead,” the chorus chants. “Was justice caught in this net?” the Leader asks. “Not yet. Not quite yet,” the chorus whispers back.

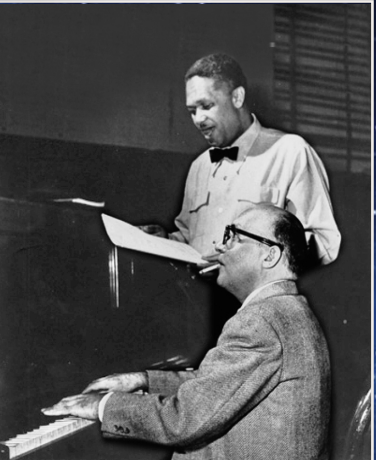
Naomi Graber
Associate Professor of Musicology
University of Georgia

“Before Lord God made the sea and the land / He held all the stars in the palm of His hand ... And He stated and promised He’d take special care ...” Today, as a Black man, I reside inside the songs of my heart-held favorite, *Lost in the Stars*. A comfort and a warning. “And sometimes it seems maybe God’s gone away / Forgetting the promise that we heard Him say; And we’re lost out here in the stars...”

Tazewell Thompson
Director, playwright, librettist,
Foundation trustee

“Train go now to Johannesburg” ... The politics of departure loom over *Lost in the Stars*, Weill’s last completed work. As a South African, I have an instinctive soft spot for this “musical tragedy” based on Alan Paton’s novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*, even if few others do; for all its faults (sentimentality among them), it’s very possible the time may yet soon come for this piece addressing migrant workers, racism, and the death penalty.

John Allison
Editor, *Opera* magazine



FROM TOP: The musical *Lost in the Stars* is based on the novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton.

2) South African sign in English and Afrikaans during apartheid. The national tour of *Lost in the Stars* after the Broadway run was cut short thanks to *de jure* racial discrimination; white and Black cast members were prohibited from staying in the same hotels in many cities, and they refused to continue.

3) Original window card from the Broadway production of *Lost in the Stars*

4) Rev. Stephen Kumalo (Todd Duncan) and his nephew Alex (Herbert Coleman), Broadway

5) Weill and actor Todd Duncan rehearse *Lost in the Stars* for the 1949 Broadway production. This would be Weill’s last work for the stage before he died the following year.



WEIGHING IN ON WEILL AT 125

Weill remains a thorny yet intriguing figure for today’s scholars, as demonstrated by two essay collections derived from recent conferences that look back at Weill’s music and theater, while at the same time indicating future directions for Weill studies. Professor Emeritus **Jürgen Thym** of the Eastman School of Music weighs in.

In *Works*, Weill unequivocally takes center stage; in *Resonances*, he is appropriated for the cause of antifascism, even though direct references seem forced, with notable exceptions. Both books open up ways of coming to grips with Weill: one sheds new light on an artist still considered problematic by music historians 75 years after his death, for reasons of biography and esthetics; the other explores the uses of music, including Weill’s, in addressing political issues. *Works* derives from a virtual conference in May 2021 sponsored by the University of Turin. *Resonances* stems from a symposium connected with the yearlong “Kurt Weill Festival: A Story of Immigration” organized by the Buffalo Philharmonic during the 2018–19 season. As a decades-long observer of Weill scholarship, I noticed many new names in both publications, which indicates that the composer continues to generate interest, pose problems, and stir debate.

Works contains several essays on Weill’s encounters with motion pictures. The first two take up his little-known early theoretical writings on film and their relation to his work in the 1930s and ’40s.

Stephen Hinton shows that film left traces in Weill’s works for the stage (the composer saw film as an essential ingredient of Brecht’s epic theater) and explores Weill’s efforts to realize his vision of art for mass media in various unfinished or unsatisfying collaborative projects. The essay excels because it demonstrates impressive command of Weill’s music and writing and connects it engagingly with other critics’ work, past (Walter Benjamin) and current (Wolfgang Iser, Berthold Hoeckner). Francesco Finocchiaro complements Hinton’s essay with a discussion of Weill’s stance on film music: it should not just replicate in sound the narrative on the screen (known in Hollywood circles as mickey-mousing); rather, music should function as a kind of “counterpoint” (as in his stage works) that comments on the action and becomes “an essential part of the ‘epic attitude’ of the work of art” (p. 23).

William A. Everett shows that Weill, in two works premiered in 1945—the musical *The Firebrand of Florence* and the film *Where Do We Go from Here?*—used operetta conventions and topoi familiar to American audiences and subverted them for comic

effect. Weill’s disappointments in adapting his stage works to the silver screen form the context of Marida Rizzuti’s essay, which describes studio conditions and explores Hollywood veteran Ann Ronell’s role in mediating between composer and studio for *One Touch of Venus*. Rizzuti concludes that “the horizon of expectations of the two parties was different: Weill intended to assert and claim an awareness and control typical of a composer firmly convinced of his role in society. Such a vision conflicted with the productive nature of the Hollywood film industry [i.e., conventions and procedures for making films]” (p. 95).

Other essays say nothing about Weill and film. Tim Carter goes beyond the previous understanding of Weill’s contributions to the war effort by uncovering details about the origin and checkered history of “Song of the Free” (text by Archibald MacLeish). It is a case study of the composer’s precarious position as an “enemy alien” in a country at war with Germany. But Weill had already Americanized himself, and shown he was not opposed to lending his artistry to practical or political purposes. Naomi Graber focuses on *Railroads on Parade* (commissioned for the World’s Fair of 1939–40) which draws extensively on popular and folk tunes. The Fair signaled to Americans (and the rest of the world) that the United States had overcome the Great Depression and was on the cusp of a “techno-utopian future” with “seemingly limitless possibilities” (p. 57). Graber exposes such corporate propaganda: “The pageant seems to unite folklore and industry through music, reframing the phenomenon as intimately connected to corporate capitalist endeavors. Thus, corporate capitalism and folk-song become two sides of the same coin, rather than opposing forces” (p. 73). It is unclear if Weill, who endorsed labor rights and government-supported social programs, was aware of any such subtext, but anyone interested in how music may be used to support political causes needs to read Graber’s essay.

Weill’s contributions to making room for opera on Broadway still await systematic study. (Stephen Hinton has laid the groundwork in *Weill’s Musical Theater: Stages of Reform*.) Rebecca Schmid tackles the issue head-on, comparing *Street Scene* (1947) with Leonard Bernstein’s *West Side Story* (1957) and providing evidence that Bernstein, though he may have denied it, learned a lot from Weill. See also Schmid’s book *Weill, Blitzstein, and Bernstein: A Study of Influence* (University of Rochester Press, 2023).

Weill tried to gain a foothold in London’s West End in the mid-1930s with two productions: *Anna-Anna* (a translation of *Die sieben Todsünden*) and the operetta *A Kingdom for a Cow* (an adaptation of *Der Kuhhandel*). Both works, as Arianne Johnson

Quinn claims, caused collisions with the British cultural establishment represented by the BBC, resulting from and reinforcing prejudice against German composers. Misako Ohta traces early Weill reception in Japan with a fascinating picture of the success in Tokyo of *Die Dreigroschenoper*. The work received no fewer than three productions in 1932 (a year before the American premiere!), evidence of a veritable “Threepenny Fever,” which Ohta connects with the rise of an urban popular culture in Tokyo, a city that only recently had been rebuilt after the 1923 earthquake.

Theodor Adorno’s dismissive comparison of Weill’s American compositions with those of Cole Porter gets a surprising twist in Tobias Fasshauer’s essay, grounded in historical evidence and harmonic analysis. Porter studied in Paris after World War I and composed a ballet that premiered alongside works by Milhaud and Satie, whose practice of combining modernism and popular music bore some resemblance to Weill’s. Fasshauer compares sophisticated harmonic progressions from songs by each composer and concludes, “the claim that Weill and Porter are hard to distinguish from each other is in fact a compliment to both” (p. 221). Leo Izzo, a jazz historian with a stunning grasp of both the music and history, steers the reader through a thicket of “transformations and reconfigurations” (the volume’s subtitle is particularly apt here) to which Weill’s music was subjected by jazz musicians in the mid-twentieth century. Weill crossed borders and, posthumously, inspired others to do so as well. Izzo adds a few tantalizing paragraphs (sure to be amplified on another occasion) on Weill reception in post-war Italy, showing that his music touched such avant-garde composers as Bruno Maderna.

Fasshauer’s and Izzo’s essays point to the other volume under discussion. As its full title suggests, *Resonances* hones a political edge throughout: the fear that the United States could succumb in our own day to authoritarian, even fascist, forces—reinforced by each day’s headlines, which chronicle attacks on Americans in the form of civil rights rescinded, oligarchs openly in charge, and unregulated capitalism. Despite appearing in the title, Weill is not the protagonist; some references are merely casual, and his anti-fascist credentials do not receive as much emphasis as they might. Yet three authors offer counterpoint to Fasshauer and Izzo by exploring the use popular musicians have made of Weill’s music.

James Currie and Jacques Lezra question the extent to which *Threepenny Opera*’s polemic was understood at the time of its premiere, but both point to Nina Simone’s later performances of “Pirate Jenny,” rendering a song that might be misunderstood as “entertainment” (thus stripped of its revolutionary agenda)

The Works of Kurt Weill: Transformations and Reconfigurations in 20th-Century Music
ed. Naomi Graber and Marida Rizzuti
(Brepols, 2023) ISBN: 978-2-503-60674-3

Resonances against Fascism: Modernist and Avant-Garde Sounds from Kurt Weill to Black Lives Matter
ed. Laura Chiesa
(SUNY Press, 2024) ISBN: 978-1-4384-9630-6

as a means to change society. Both authors demonstrate considerable intellectual virtuosity in making their case; their essays should be required reading for anybody interested in the intersections of music, performance, and politics. Weill assumes an even stronger presence in William Solomon's paper. Taking up Hinton's suggestion in *Stages of Reform* that Weill inspired rock musicians, Solomon fleshes it out with numerous details and examples, discussing Lou Reed, David Bowie, Jim Morrison, Bob Dylan, Patti Smith, and Randy Newman at length. He also points out similarities between Brecht's epic theater and the performance practices of rock musicians—all of it new territory for Weill research.

Back to *Works*: Nils Grosch provides a key essay aimed at long-standing efforts to divide the European from the American Weill and decide which of the two really counted. An individual's identity, the author claims, is never stable but depends on biography, experiences, reception, and community. He discusses the composer's strategies of identity management across several decades, drawing on Stephen Greenblatt's concept of "cultural mobility," and concludes: "In the multiple self-representations Weill gives in articles and interviews, we always find him telling a story of continuation and agency, even through expulsion and exile. Even his reference to the American fashions, topics, and styles of his Berlin works ... can be read as a narrative more about the mobility of his own thinking than ... about his claims to 'Americanness'" (pp. 157–158).

Thirty years ago, Kim Kowalke made a convincing case against the two-Weill formula in "Kurt Weill, Modernism, and Popular Culture: *Öffentlichkeit als Stil*" (1995). In "What Makes Weill Weill?," which appears in both volumes, he provides an engaging variation on that topic. After rehearsing three obituaries from 1950 and invoking Milan Kundera to characterize Weill's itinerary as a constant transformation or "winding road," Kowalke identifies many constants in the composer's works throughout his career (worth fleshing



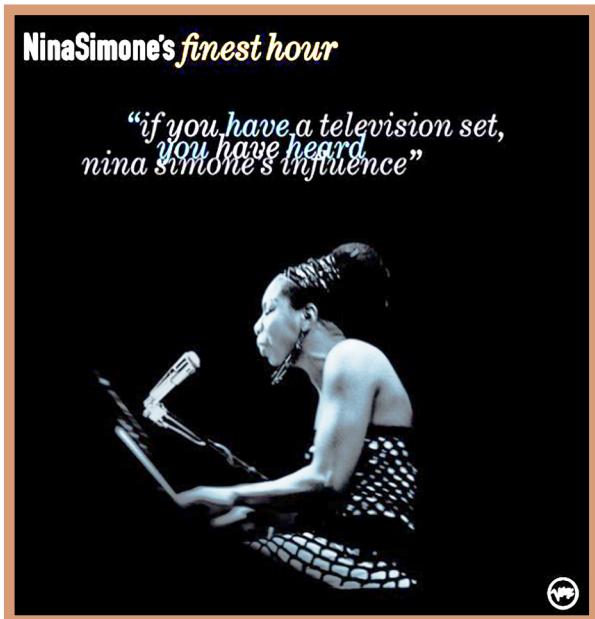
NO BONES ABOUT IT: Disney's animated film, "The Skeleton Dance," informed Weill's early discussions of film music.

out elsewhere) and concludes: "An astonishing polystylism, an eclectic counterpoint of musical idioms, conventions, and styles in the service of dramatic function, characterizes virtually every one of Weill's two dozen stage works. This may be the most distinctive and stable component of his compositional procedure" (p. 258).

Kowalke pays tribute to an American musicologist who helped us to overcome entrenched perspectives and challenged our minds as few others have done. In the Spring 1988 *Newsletter*, Richard Taruskin declared Weill "perhaps the twentieth century's most problematical major musician" in a review of David Drew's *Handbook*. Decades later, Taruskin devoted considerable space to Weill in his magnum opus, the *Oxford History of Western Music* (2005). Kowalke once suggested to me that Taruskin had "converted": "His questioning of high modernism [and of a teleological trajectory of music history] allowed room for Weill in the history of music." "Can an art dedicated to shocking the middle class out of its complacency," asks Taruskin, referring to *Die Dreigroschenoper*, "be said to have succeeded when that very public consumes it with delight?" He suggests an answer by locating Weill as an antipode to Schoenberg, who insisted that an artist's obligation is to art, not to people.

Taruskin's adjective, "problematical," still reverberates in the echo chambers of Weill scholarship. After absorbing *Works* and *Resonances*, I'm inclined to invert the question: Maybe we are the problem, bound to Hegelian (or teleological) models of historical progress (favoring high modernism) or bound to musical Eurocentrism (self-inflicted provincialism). If Taruskin were with us to come to grips with Weill at 125, I suspect he would argue that Weill opened windows to musical repertoires other

than classical, and to the rest of the world. He might even see the composer as a pioneer of sorts, who pried open the entrenched positions from which we create and think about music. That, in turn, would cause Weill to emerge as a key figure in rewriting our musical histories in the next quarter century and beyond.



Nina Simone singing "Pirate Jenny"
(Live At Carnegie Hall, New York, 1964)

WIDE WORLD OF WEILL



Wainwright Loves Weill

Word has come from Rufus Wainwright's camp that his Weill concert in Los Angeles, celebrated on 2 March 2024, the composer's birthday, will be issued as a live audio recording. The collaboration with Pacific Jazz Orchestra under conductor and arranger Chris Walden boasted fourteen Weill songs. Wainwright's long-held interest in Weill's music continues to burgeon; he describes "Wainwright Does Weill" as "channeling Weill's music through a 21st-century lens with wit, grandeur, and unapologetic heart." More information about the project: <https://www.rufuswainwright.com/wainwright-does-weill>



Stage to Studio

Following her star turn as Liza Elliott in Opera Zuid's production of *Lady in the Dark* (2022), Dutch soprano Maartje Rammelloo has released her debut album through Bandcamp (streaming and CD), *Longing to Be Loved*. The program opens with Maury Yeston's *December Songs* and follows with a generous selection of Broadway standards. Among them: "I'm a Stranger Here Myself," "That's Him" (both from *One Touch of Venus*), "Stay Well" (*Lost in the Stars*), and Blitzstein's "I Wish It So" (*Juno*). Rammelloo is backed by pianist Enrico Delamboy and musicians from the Metropole Orkest.

Sic semper tyrannis

British contralto Jess Dandy seized Weill's music to deliver a pointed message at Wigmore Hall on 20 January 2025, Inauguration Day in the U.S., when she dusted off the infrequently performed "Wie lange noch?" (1944), a tacit yet impassioned question from a German exile: how much longer must we endure tyranny? The lyrics by Walter Mehring do not mention Hitler's name, but the reference to his sway over Germany was, and remains, clear. Her program's title, "In the dark times will there still be singing?" (quoted from Brecht) makes the reference plainer still.



Reproduced with permission of Don Bachardy

The Model Lenya

Portraitist Don Bachardy, long a fixture in the Southern California art world, is displaying his work at The Huntington in San Marino during the summer of 2025. A respected artist for over sixty years, Bachardy was also the long-time companion of Christopher Isherwood, extraordinary chronicler of Weimar Berlin. His thousands of subjects over the decades included Lotte Lenya, whom he drew in 1961, around the time she played Jenny in the Los Angeles run of the off-Broadway production of *The Threepenny Opera*. The portrait forms part of the exhibition and also appears in the catalogue, *Don Bachardy: A Life in Portraits*, available from The Huntington.

The Time is Reif

Christian Reif, who won a Grammy last year as pianist and conductor on his wife Julia Bullock's album *Walking in the Dark*, is the latest in a long line of conductors to take up Weill's *Fantaisie symphonique* (Symphony no. 2). Having performed it in April with the Gävle Symphony, where he serves as Music Director, he has also programmed it with the Houston and Nashville Symphonies in October 2025. He explained, "This symphony is a testament to what a great orchestral composer Weill was. ... It's a very exciting, slightly dark, but powerful piece."

All-American Sextet

Despite dramatic changes at Kennedy Center, Washington National Opera continues to call it home, hosting a fundraising gala on 3 May headlined by Renée Fleming, Denyce Graves, and Thomas Hampson. WNO's Cafritz Young Artists got into the act as well, with "a spunky, full-throated performance" (*Washington Classical Review*) of the "Ice Cream Sextet" from *Street Scene*. It took nerve to present an ensemble number in which immigrants figure so prominently. Artistic Director Francesca Zambello summed it up: "We take the word 'National' in our name very seriously."



Prime Time Mackie!

"Mack the Knife" remains a perennial favorite, and it turns up with surprising frequency on television talent shows. In February 2025, contestant Hayden Grove on *The Voice* (NBC) made all four judges sit up and take notice with a rendition of the song he first performed in sixth grade and has sung thousands of times since. Adam Levine chose Grove for his team, but he received impromptu coaching on the spot from fellow crooner Michael Bublé, who said, "he has everything it takes." Grove was eliminated later, during the Battles round, but he got as far as he did thanks to Weill and Blitzstein.



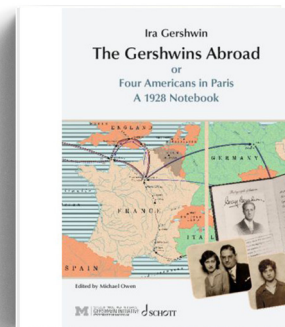
Bobby Goes Broadway

Every Weill fan knows that Bobby Darin made “Mack the Knife” a number-one hit in 1959, building on the work of Louis Armstrong and others to give pop immortality to the first song of *The Threepenny Opera*. Thanks to the new Broadway musical *Just in Time*, the rest of the world is finding out. “Mack the Knife” closes the first act in Groff’s bravura performance, and gets an encore during curtain calls, when other cast members reprise the song.

The jukebox/bio-musical, which recounts Darin’s life and career, originated in a Lyrics and Lyricists evening in 2018 produced by Ted Chapin. The star of that evening, Jonathan Groff, and the director, Alex Timbers, both Broadway royalty, united with Chapin and others to transform the evening into a full-fledged show, which opened at Circle in the Square on 26 April 2025. Groff’s performance has left critics grasping for superlatives: “bursting with charisma” (*New York Post*); “immensely appealing performer” (*Wall Street Journal*); “sure to rack up many more awards” (*DC Theatre Arts*). He was nominated for a Tony (Best Actor in a Musical) after having won the same award last year; his performance at the awards ceremony included “Mack the Knife” as part of a medley with “That’s All” and “Once in a Lifetime.” The production did not win any Tonys but earned six nominations: Groff, Best Actress (Gracie Lawrence), Best Scenic Design (Derek McLane), Best Costume Design (Catherine Zuber), Best Sound Design (Peter Hylenski), and Best Orchestrations (Andrew Resnick and Michael Thurber). Tickets are on sale for performances through the end of the year.

The Kurt Weill Edition Scores Again

The new critical edition of the complete score and libretto of Weill and Georg Kaiser’s *Der Silbersee* (Kurt Weill Edition, Series I, volume 9) has appeared! Prepared by Managing Editor Elmar Juchem, the new edition arrives as interest in this play with music has been accelerating. Several recent productions have made use of preliminary versions of the performing materials, helping the editor to identify

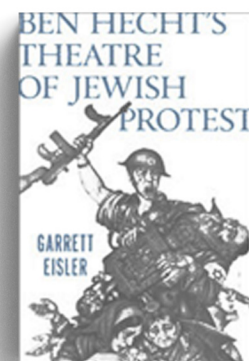


New Between Covers

The first half of 2025 has brought forth new books helpful to Weill scholars and fans. Michael Owen, archivist of the Gershwin Trust for many years, deploys his expertise in two separate volumes, *The Gershwins Abroad*—Ira’s journal of a trip to Germany in 1928, transcribed and edited by Owen as

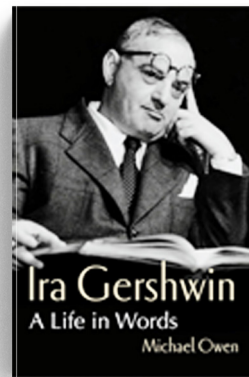
part of the University of Michigan’s Gershwin initiative—and *Ira Gershwin: A Life in Words* (Liveright). The travel diary notes that Weill visited George Gershwin at his hotel on 24 April 1928, as Weill was beginning to work in earnest on *Die Dreigroschenoper*. Owen’s biography acknowledges Weill’s importance as Ira’s post-George collaborator with accounts of their work together on *Lady in the Dark*, *Where Do We Go from Here?*, and *The Firebrand of Florence*. Owen also notes the commercial release of Weill and Gershwin’s test recordings of songs from *Where Do We Go from Here?* along with Weill’s tests of numbers from *One Touch of Venus*, laying out Gershwin’s misgivings and Lotte Lenya’s powers of persuasion (the recording is still available under the title *Tryout*, released on CD by DRG Records).

Another Weill collaborator is the subject of Garrett Eisler’s *Ben Hecht’s Theatre of Jewish Protest* (Rutgers Univ. Press). Long a student of Hecht’s propaganda plays and pageants, Eisler offers thorough accounts of Hecht’s work as a one-man writer/impresario advocating for Jewish victims of the Holocaust and a



Jewish homeland in the Middle East. Complete published scripts of four plays appear in the appendix, including the two collaborations with Weill, *We Will Never Die* (1943) and *A Flag Is Born* (1946). Weill’s “Jewish pageants” are not as well understood as much of his American output; Eisler’s book not only lays out the process of creation and performance but places them in the larger context of Hecht’s struggle against anti-Semitism.

problems and present the cleanest, most error-free score and parts possible. The U.S. premiere of the critical edition is set for Spring 2026 at Chicago Opera Theater, directed by Lawrence Edelson; the production will feature two Lenya Competition laureates, Justin Hopkins as Olim and Curtis Bannister as Severin. Performing materials are available for rental through European American Music Distributors Company. Next up for the KWE: Weill’s symphonic works.



After Fifteen Years

Storm Large, experienced interpreter of *The Seven Deadly Sins*, took it up twice in 2024–25: with ProMusica Chamber Orchestra in Columbus, OH and with the Santa Barbara Symphony, working both times with Hudson Shad, the male vocal ensemble. (According to the group’s bass, Wilbur Pauley, Hudson Shad has portrayed the Family over one hundred times.) They’ll do it again next season with the Oregon Symphony.

In an interview with the Santa Barbara *Independent*, Large said, “[*The Sins*] really has become one of my favorite things to perform. The humor in the horror and the grace in the grotesque are such a fun mental and physical challenge for me, embodying all of it and telling the whole story to the audience, all without big, emotional cues telling them how to feel about it.” She described Weill as “a brilliant and rabid creator and distiller of chunky, insanely on-point human truths. He’s like a Bukowski or Lenny Bruce kind of composer.”



Blitzstein Back in Berlin

Once again, a European ensemble leads the way in rediscovering a forgotten work by Marc Blitzstein. First came the ballet *Cain* (1930), given its world premiere in a concert performance by the MDR Sinfonieorchester at the Brucknerhaus in Linz, Austria in 2019, then *No for an Answer* in 2023 at London’s Arcola Theatre. Coming up on 21 September 2025 at the Philharmonie in Berlin: *Parabola and Circula* (1929, libretto by George Whitsett), a one-act opera preserved in manuscript but never performed. The Norrköping Symphony Orchestra conducted by Karl-Heinz Steffens will anchor this concert performance during Musikfest Berlin; the performance is also sponsored by Bauhaus-Archiv, Museum für Gestaltung, and the Berliner Festspiele. Don’t be surprised if some of the music sounds familiar; biographer Howard Pollack notes that Blitzstein incorporated several passages from this “allegory of paradise lost” into later works, including *Regina* and the *Airborne Symphony*.



BATON OF THE YEAR

Joana Mallwitz has won Opus Klassik’s Conductor of the Year Award for the 2024 *Kurt Weill Album*!



B.E. BAM!

The Berliner Ensemble brought its globetrotting production of *The Threepenny Opera* to the Brooklyn Academy of Music for four sold-out performances in April 2025 (see review of the premiere in the Fall 2021 *Newsletter*). From reports by Joshua Barone and Alex Ross:

“the first real opportunity for New York audiences to see the work of director Barrie Kosky ... one of the busiest and most brilliant, not to mention entertaining, directors working in Europe today. ... Kosky, more than most directors, is sensitive to the polyphonic structure [of *Threepenny*] in his staging, which moves around, repeats and trims material throughout to make the show move briskly and with a light hand.”

Joshua Barone, *New York Times*, 18 February 2025

“The score itself is treated with perfect respect. Adam Benzwi, who led the ensemble from the piano and harmonium, combines scholarly expertise with virtuoso chops. ... Kosky’s cast had no weak links.”

Alex Ross, *The New Yorker*, 21 April 2025



Ute Lemper Steps Up

Ute Lemper, one of Weill’s best-known interpreters, has gone all out for his anniversary. She has brought her Weill program to New York, Dessau, London, and Vienna; the Dessau concert was especially noteworthy. It took place on 2 March, Weill’s birthday, and followed another all-Weill program given earlier that day by Ana Karneža, First Prize winner of the 2024 Lenya Competition. A double-barreled birthday tribute! In April, Lemper sang Anna I in Wuppertal for a revival of Pina Bausch’s legendary staging of *Die sieben Todsünden*. The biggest news: On 25 April, *Pirate Jenny* dropped, Lemper’s first all-Weill recording since 1993. The album consists of eight songs recorded in collaboration with ace producer David Chesky and available from The Audiophile Society and Amazon. Lemper commented, “This project is about creating a new audience for Kurt Weill. By blending his timeless melodies with a groove, I’m opening the doors for younger listeners who might not know his work. It’s about building a bridge between eras, where Weimar meets the club.”

In Memoriam

Pierre Audi
(1957–2025)

Internationally renowned Lebanese-born director and producer Pierre Audi died at age 67 in Beijing on 3 May. At the time of his sudden death, Audi was serving as Artistic Director of both the Aix-en-Provence Festival and the Park Avenue Armory in New York. He championed the works of Kurt Weill throughout a career that began in London when, at age 21, he founded the Almeida Theatre. In 1986 he produced the British premiere of *Johnny Johnson* as part of the “Not the RSC” Festival. The following year, a major “Vienna Series” featured an Eisler retrospective, and a performance of HK Gruber’s “pandemonium” *Frankenstein!!*—the first time I saw it staged—with the composer/chansonnier making his entrance on a noisy motorcycle.

The main Weill events at the Almeida came in 1990—just after Audi became artistic director of Dutch National Opera, a position he would hold for 30 years. The Almeida’s 90th birthday party for Weill featured a triple bill (televised by the BBC) of “Weill in Paris and New York” featuring staged concert adaptations of *Marie galante*, *Johnny Johnson* (“War Play”), and *Lost in the Stars* (“Cry, the Beloved Country”). The celebration included Angelina Réaux’s one-woman show, *Stranger Here Myself*, and the UK debut of the Willem Breuker Kollektief performing an all-Weill program. Ironically, the most significant performances of Weill at DNO post-date Audi’s tenure there, namely *Die sieben Todsünden* in 2021 and the five-company co-production of Ivo van Hove’s *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* in 2023. The latter had been launched by Audi at Aix, with Esa-Pekka Salonen conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra. In 2023 Audi co-produced another international Weill event in Aix, a new French translation of *The Threepenny Opera*, directed by Thomas Ostermeier. A collaboration with the Comédie-Française, it subsequently enjoyed a run of thirty sold-out performances in Paris.

At our last meeting in New York, Audi and I brainstormed possible Weill projects for the Armory. Alas, his daring barrier-breaking career has been cut short, an irreplaceable loss for theater, opera, and contemporary music. *Kim H. Kowalke*



Giunta + Gruber

A remarkable collaboration of conductor HK Gruber, mezzo-soprano Wallis Giunta, and Ensemble Modern hits the market in Fall 2025, when Ensemble Modern Medien releases its recording of music by Hindemith, Korngold, Schoenberg, and Weill. After several performances of the four-headed program in the U.S. and Europe—including Carnegie Hall in April 2024 (see review in the Spring 2024 *Newsletter*)—the musicians preserved for posterity yet another live performance on 6 January 2025 in Cologne. (The Foundation supported the recording project as a Collaborative Initiative.) Weill’s *Die sieben Todsünden* has become a signature work for Giunta; this is her first recording of it. Not only that, it is the world premiere recording of the fifteen-player version prepared by Gruber and Christian Muthspiel.

The story doesn’t end there, because Giunta and Gruber are working together on another recording of *Die sieben Todsünden*, this one in English with Weill’s original orchestrations, in collaboration with the Swedish Chamber Orchestra on BIS. The work is paired with a relative rarity, *Der neue Orpheus* (1927), Weill’s setting of a text by surrealist poet Yvan Goll—translated into English by David Pountney—for soprano (Jennifer France), solo violin (Benjamin Herzl), and orchestra. The SCO previously recorded both of Weill’s symphonies with Gruber (see the Spring 2023 *Newsletter*).



Marianne Faithfull
(1946–2025)

PHOTO: Tony Wright

Singer and songwriter Marianne Faithfull’s remarkable life has been immortalized many times, including in two memoirs that she wrote herself. Remembered by rock and pop historians for her association with the Rolling Stones and her own long and successful singing career, Faithfull’s affinity for Weill’s music came through most strongly in the 1980s and 1990s. It began, according to her memoir *Memories, Dreams & Reflections* (2007), with hearing *Die sieben Todsünden* in the 1980s (although she also notes that she had heard Lenya’s voice “in [her] mother’s womb”). To the 1985 Weill tribute album *Lost in the Stars*, she contributed “Ballad of the Soldier’s Wife” and went on from there, performing in *The Threepenny Opera* (Jenny, Gate Theatre Dublin, 1991) and the *Sins* (several times, notably in concert with the Orchestra of St. Luke’s, 1989) and issuing two recordings, *20th Century Blues* (including nine Weill songs with pianist Paul Trueblood) and *The Seven Deadly Sins*, sung an octave below original pitch, with the Vienna Radio Symphony conducted by Dennis Russell Davies, both on RCA. In her 2007 memoir, she stated simply, “*The Seven Deadly Sins* is my favourite record.”

DER PROTAGONIST
Blurred Lines Between
Method and Madness

Der Protagonist
Teatro Malibran, La Fenice
Venice

Ezio Toffolutti, director
Markus Stenz, conductor
Premiere: 2 May 2025



Second pantomime PHOTO: Michele Crosera

Der Protagonist, a one-act opera with a libretto by Georg Kaiser, represents one of the most intense and conceptually complex moments of early Weimar musical theater, a musical and dramaturgical experiment of extraordinary depth, which lucidly addresses the disintegration of subjective identity and the collapse of boundaries between art and life. The Protagonist—an actor who immerses himself so deeply in his performance that he loses the ability to distinguish between the stage and reality—becomes the emblem of a torn existential and cognitive condition. The 1926 premiere followed only a few months after the premiere of *Wozzeck*, and both operas seem to address the same question: Where do madness and alienation originate? Like Berg’s soldier, Weill’s actor is also a victim of forces beyond rational control, but here the source of madness is esthetic rather than social or historical, rooted in the very mechanism of representation.

On the musical level, Weill adopts a style that juxtaposes expressionism, associated primarily with the frame story, with neoclassical elements in the metadramatic pantomimes; he moves skillfully from lyrical moments to tense and percussive passages, underscoring the Protagonist’s inner disintegration. That musical fabric guided director Ezio Toffolutti’s interpretation. (“It is the music itself that directs.”) The musical language, however, does not merely represent; it becomes a form of acting and a commentary on the unfolding drama. In this sense, *Der Protagonist* achieves a radical form of “theater within musical theater.”

The director, who also designed the sets, costumes, and lighting, set the opera in the years following World War I, situating the narrative in the cultural atmosphere in which it was conceived. With the costumes, Toffolutti created a sharp distinction between the characters in everyday life—sober attire characteristic of that era—and as performers in the two pantomimes, in which the costumes became much more elaborate and fanciful. The first

(comic) pantomime featured colorful, almost clown-like costumes; the performers wore much darker clothes during the tragic pantomime that follows. The sets and lighting did their part to distinguish the pantomimes as well, as the lights dimmed for the second pantomime. The unit set, a single high-walled room painted in muted colors, turned into a stage as actors built and decorated the pantomime sets in full view of the audience—a highlight of the director’s conception—creating a stage-within-a-stage effect that perfectly matched the metadramatic strategy of *Der Protagonist*.

Every singer in the cast contributed to a meticulously crafted performance and a nuanced interpretation, especially in the shifts between comic and tragic registers. The two leads, Matthias Koziorowski (Protagonist) and Martina Welschenbach (Sister), both handled the challenging vocal demands of their roles admirably and created convincing portrayals as well. Koziorowski enacted madness masterfully, gradually adding subtle hints of detachment from reality as the opera went on. Welschenbach, in turn, succeeded in building a complex character—seemingly subdued and dominated by her brother at first, but ultimately proud, facing her brother and her fate with defiance. The moment of the Sister’s killing was restrained, even sublime, yet very powerful. The Protagonist embraced her, then pierced her throat with a stiletto, alluding unmistakably to a pressing issue in Italy today: the high rate of femicide.

After some early balance problems between orchestra and singers, Markus Stenz steadied the ensemble and restored the rapport between stage and pit. Throughout, the orchestra played cohesively and blended well, as Stenz led the musicians through an accurate and idiomatic reading of a difficult score. The wind octet, onstage during both pantomimes, sounded excellent, always in tune and helping to create the necessary distinction between the pantomimes, thus setting up the final scene.

Der Protagonist is a crossroads of languages, quotations, and stylistic tensions, anticipating many experimental and self-reflective practices in works that came later. The nameless, identity-less actor-protagonist is at once subject and object, mask and face, a victim of a theatrical machine which, in its perfect functioning, erases any possibility of verifiable truth.

Marida Rizzuti
University of Turin



First pantomime PHOTO: Michele Crosera

7 DEADLY SINS and other works

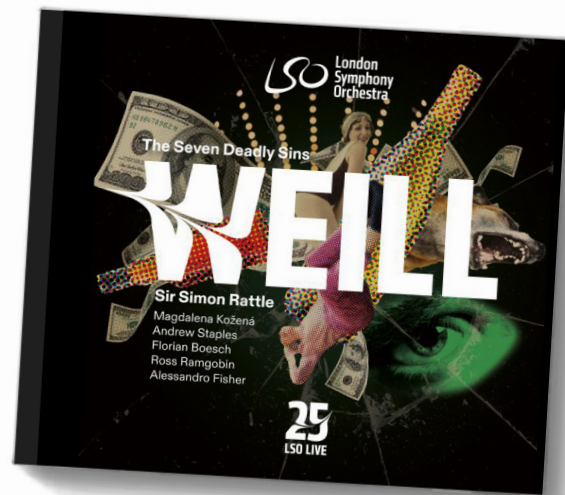
Rattle Unifies Weill's Musical World

Magdalena Kožená, et al., soloists | London Symphony Orchestra
Sir Simon Rattle, conductor | LSO Live LSO0880

There is something poetic (perhaps poietic) about Kurt Weill's musical multitudes rendered through the hybrid form of a live recording CD release. A composer whose concept of *Gestus* and versatile approach to writing music resists categories of genre, nation, and cultural consumption, Weill embodies that tantalizing tension between the immaterial and the material—work concept and live(d) event. The still-accessible online video of the twenty-fifth-anniversary LSO Live performance preserved on this album (albeit with the order of the two large-scale works reversed) provides a fleshy, lively, visually stimulating counterpart to this sterling acoustic document. Flexing remarkable technology and musicianship, Sir Simon Rattle and the London Symphony Orchestra have married the gestural imprint of a concert experience—in all its specific consideration of physical space, audience engagement, and personnel—with the precision and permanence of a recording project. The performers and audio engineers bring to the concert hall—and ultimately to our speakers and earbuds—a warmly resonant and polished sampling of Weill's music from 1927 to 1946, rich in opportunities to feature the company of vocal soloists needed to perform the 1933 *ballet chanté*, *Die sieben Todsünden*.

The resultant commingling of genres, instrumentations and locations (Berlin, Paris, and New York) find meeting ground in one heart, one hall. Rattle treats Weill's *oeuvre* with sonic coherence, further dissolving distinctions between European/American and classical/popular Weill.

Framing the album are concert adaptations of two theater works, which omit the stage action that does much to convey social satire. In the concert version of *Die sieben Todsünden*, we miss dancer/victim Anna II's empathetic movements, which hold the caustic words of Anna I, soprano, at critical length. In *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik*, a compositionally crafty compilation of songs from *Die Dreigroschenoper*, wind soloists replace human characters, subsuming parodic text. The four vocal pieces performed in between—Weill's cantata *Vom Tod im Wald* (1927), the tenor arietta “Lonely House” from *Street Scene* (1946), and two of Weill's settings of Walt Whitman (1942)—span a broad tonal and stylistic spectrum, all within the low-voice register, smoothly sung by Florian Boesch, bass-baritone, Andrew Staples, tenor, and Ross Ramgobin, baritone. They are all beautifully rendered. Textual clarity capitulates on occasion to the singers' oceanic vocalism, Weill's music pulling us like a current.



In *Die sieben Todsünden*, Magdalena Kožená's voice, brightened by the original version's higher key, locates the work's critical lens. Her text rendering is immaculately clear in the context of melodic line. Her portrayal of Anna I reaches an acerbic apex during “Unzucht” (Lust); the orchestra's brassy intro veers into a scream, with string ostinati bolstered antiphonally by heroic violas. Rattle keeps the tempo moving, and Kožená never languishes in the sentimentality of the ballad's aching lyricism. The orchestral solos are a bit restrained (I wanted more from the violin trio, trombone, oboe, and trumpet), but Weill's nods to a detached neoclassical esthetic work well, with clear dotted rhythms in the timpani and surprisingly short string articulation ushering in the commentary by Anna's family, the male quartet.

Interpretation of dotted rhythms, which pervade *Die sieben Todsünden*, may shift sonic signification either to eighteenth-century or jazz idiom. In general, the dotted rhythms in this recording are too relaxed. From the “Prolog” to the uncontrolled middle section of “Zorn” to the march in “Neid,” Rattle sacrifices classical bite for twentieth-century dance-hall sound. Still, I love the elasticity and playful exaggeration of the waltz in “Stolz,” particularly the accelerating woodwind line heralding the instrumental break. Anna II may not be present, but it sounds like the instruments of the orchestra are dancing. In *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik*, the wind players stay within the disciplined bounds of uniform vibrato, articulation, and tone color; they lack the zany character and abandon of the 2019 Ensemble Modern recording with HK Gruber. The LSO's sound refers less to *Die Dreigroschenoper*'s idiosyncratic original theater pit and more to the compositional intricacy of Weill's formal ambition. More polished than theatrical, the sound is symphonic, institutional.

While this live recording occasionally loses clarity of articulation (for example, the ill-defined strings against bright brass in *Die sieben Todsünden*'s “Faulheit”), the greater absence is irony. Is it possible for performers to embody critical distance in a concert setting? Rattle and company have created a glowing homage; it is clear they love and live comfortably within this music. But I'm not sure Weill's music should make us feel comfortable, especially now.

Anna Wittstruck
Boston College

A WEILL TRIPLE BILL From “Mandelay” to “Youkali,” La Scala Singers Captivate

Die sieben Todsünden
Mahagonny Songspiel
The Songs of *Happy End*

Irina Brook, director
Riccardo Chailly, conductor
Milan | Teatro alla Scala
Premiere: 14 May 2025



In 2021, during the COVID shutdown, Irina Brook staged and filmed *Die sieben Todsünden* and *Mahagonny Songspiel* at La Scala; the result was streamed to audiences worldwide. Since the production could earn nothing at the box office, Brook made it as economical as possible, relying on the theater's storeroom and second-hand shops. The single set consisted of a stage within the stage with a screen above it for video projections, a bar in one corner, a clothes rack in another, and the smaller stage surrounded by masses of empty plastic bottles. Although Brook's interpretation was not strikingly original or insightful, the performance came across well on video. Close-ups highlighted the savvy and spontaneous interaction of the singers, pre-recorded videos were smoothly integrated into the narration, and the sonic balance between the voices and instruments seemed ideal. Chailly clearly delighted in the dance rhythms and orchestration.

This year they took it live, adding in the process “The Songs of *Happy End*” to form what was promoted as a novel theatrical “triptych” devoted to Weill and Brecht. Soprano Alma Sadé replaced Kate Lindsey as Anna I and Bessie; otherwise the cast was largely unchanged, aside from three members added for *Happy End*, and Chailly was once again fully galvanized in the pit. In the theater, the first two works, though undeniably well-rehearsed, seemed less integrated and psychologically revealing than before. Facial expressions were often difficult to make out, and in the more declamatory numbers the volume of the orchestra—the pit was raised to be closer to the action on stage—sometimes made it challenging for the singers to express the variety of nuance that the music cries out for. Andrew Harris's roomy and eloquent

bass effortlessly filled the auditorium as the Mother in *Die sieben Todsünden* and as Jimmy in *Mahagonny*, but Sadé's performance in the latter work, though admirably executed on its own terms, seemed slightly underpowered for a theater of this size. And while Lauren Michelle phrased beautifully as Jessie and displayed delightful touches of humor as Anna II, the decision to reduce the choreography to a minimum in *Die sieben Todsünden* made it difficult to perceive connections between the action devised by Brook and the seven deadly sins evoked in the title of what was after all conceived as a *ballet chanté*.

Brook's stagings lack the musical dramaturgy normally applied to opera, and the songs extracted from *Happy End* are deprived even of their narrative framework. In this case the director opted for a bare, dark set with minimal props and the singers sitting in a semi-circle awaiting their turn in the spotlight. The staging undeniably strengthened the impact of the songs, for the singers came right down to the front of the stage, where their voices resonated more effectively in the auditorium (with energetic support from the Scala Orchestra) and their facial expressions and gestures lent striking individuality to each character, even without plot or dialogue. Marc Heinz's lighting was much appreciated here, as was Paul Pui Wo Lee's choreography, employed to exhilarating effect in Sam Worlitzer's “Mandelay-Song,” delivered with unforgettably vulgar panache by the baritone Elliott Carlton Hines (who also played the First Brother and Bobby). Equally compelling were Markus Werba as Bill Cracker in “The Bilbao-Song” and Michael Smallwood as Hanibal Jackson.

The choral episodes, notably “Hosiannah Rockefeller,” were exciting in their impact, and although Natascha Petrinsky's mezzo wasn't entirely comfortable in the music of *The Fly*, Michelle (Jane) and Sadé (Mary) were heard at their best, as was the sweet-toned mezzo Wallis Giunta (Lilian Holiday), who brought the evening to an evocative close with a candlelit performance of “Youkali.” Brook added this intimate tango-habanera, which doesn't come from *Happy End*, to provide an upbeat ending, even though we are reminded in the final bars that Youkali, an idealized land of freedom, happiness and dreams come true, doesn't really exist...

Stephen Hastings
Milan



ABOVE LEFT: Wallis Giunta ABOVE: Lauren Michelle PHOTOS: Brescia e Amisano

Love Life

OPERA NORTH, UK

Matthew Eberhardt, director
James Holmes, conductor
Will Tuckett, choreographer
16–18 January 2025

“Razzle-dazzle” production ignites Weill’s vaudeville



The Leeds-based British company Opera North wears Kurt Weill like a lucky charm and every few years it pulls out a cracker. Prior to *Street Scene* in 2020 there was *One Touch of Venus* (2004) and before that, in 1996, the European premiere of *Love Life*. This year they’ve taken another look at the latter and staged it with energy and flair under Matthew Eberhardt’s joyous direction. Thanks to its glitzy razzle-dazzle plus sparkling book and lyrics by the young *Brigadoon* alum Alan Jay Lerner, *Love Life* has claims to be Weill’s most rousing entertainment: a swaggering, full-fat musical, tailor-made for the Great White Way.

Like Leonard Bernstein’s subsequent *Trouble in Tahiti*, a companion work to both *Street Scene* and *Love Life* whether the Maestro intended it or not, Weill’s preoccupation with the sour underbelly of wedded bliss has an extra tartness when heard through 21st-century ears. Unconscious chauvinism is everywhere, even in the dated morality of the “wait till your father gets home” school of parenting, as the all-American Cooper family—well-intentioned but fallible—navigates its way through centuries of chafing domesticity.

This new account came wrapped in a ribbon and tied in a bow. If Zahra Mansouri’s designs were unassuming, the onstage presence of Opera North’s spit-spot orchestra gave the show an infectious visual kick while some hyper-energized dance routines by Will Tuckett, doyen of British choreographers, added a luster of boisterous fun to the experience.

Love Life’s need for a vast cast played to Opera North’s strengths, since its chorus members regularly take *comprimario* roles in the standard repertoire. Here, both individually and collectively, they held sway variously as townsfolk, a narrative octet, a cluster of madrigal singers and plenty more besides. In more spotlighted realms the number simply called “Love Song” was a show-stopping gift for the American bass-baritone (and Kurt Weill/Lotte Lenya Artist) Justin Hopkins, who dropped by solely to sing that song and steal the show.

The drama opened with a couple of magical illusions that served to introduce Sam and Susan, the star pair whose lives—and those of their children Johnny and Elizabeth—were destined to endure indefinitely, changed only by the vagaries of societal progress. Weill and Lerner placed this ageless nuclear family under a microscope with the heartless objectivity of scientists observing lab rats making their way through ever-changing environments. The process of creating those environments was difficult, and the authors added and cut songs and scenes ceaselessly before the Broadway opening, which makes for tough decisions about what to include and leave out when staging the show today. They might have done better late in Part II, when a succession of eleven-o’clock numbers bumped into one another and threatened to upend the narrative.

Weill and Lerner themselves billed the work as a “vaudeville,” and with so many variety acts and hooper numbers it’s a valid description. Mostly so, anyway. For *Love Life* is also a daring study of human behavior, with some surprisingly unambiguous sex references for 1948 and one genuinely upsetting musical number, Susan’s lament for her broken marriage “Is It Him Or Is It Me?.” Stephanie Corley’s performance here was a torch singer’s tour de force.

Corley was impeccably partnered by Quirijn de Lang as her husband, Sam. The Dutch baritone’s rich, melodious timbre was delivered with a crystal clarity that rendered the surtitles redundant. He commented elsewhere about what drives his character in a musical written so soon after World War II: “Sam would really like to stay at home with his family, but he has to go out and do the thing capitalism needs him to do.” Therein lies a dramatic tension that in the mid-twentieth century underpinned not only this fictional couple but countless real-life marriages.

With two powerful leads, a clutch of super-talented triple-threat children and outstanding musical direction by Weill specialist James Holmes, the case for *Love Life* has been well made by Opera North. Sure, the story’s downbeat message is relentless, but then so is Weill’s musical sunshine—and that transforms the pessimism into a night of vitamin-packed nourishment for the soul. And what a treat to hear Lerner’s prototype version of “I Remember It Well,” a song that would be born again ten years later in Lerner & Loewe’s *Gigi*. May this fizzing new production help *Love Life* rise as brightly.

Mark Valencia
London

TOP LEFT to RIGHT: Stephanie Corley and Quirijn de Lang as Samuel and Susan Cooper, Themba Mvula as the Magician. PHOTOS: James Glossop

LOVE LIFE

NEW YORK CITY CENTER ENCORES!

Victoria Clark, director
Rob Berman, conductor
JoAnn M. Hunter, choreographer
26–30 March 2025

Baldwin and Mitchell charm in time-traveling tale



“I wish I loved the book and lyrics as much as I love the music.” So wrote Alan Jay Lerner when recalling the 1948 musical that he wrote with Weill. Many who attended the Encores! production saw his point.

Love for Weill began when Rob Berman struck up the 29-piece orchestra. Ever more substantial applause greeted each song—mostly for Weill, because Lerner’s lyrics were surprisingly prosaic. Most rhymes involved one syllable; there were a half-dozen pairings of “wife” and “life.” His syntax was often suspect (“No more loaded hooks do I ever share”; “So on him I’ll latch”). But the book was ambitious and daring: Sam and Susan Cooper travel 157 years through time to show how marriage changed between 1791 and 1948 (when *Love Life* opened). Given Lerner’s own marital history, it isn’t surprising that the Coopers’ union has more downs than ups.

Throughout, Weill proved that he had thoroughly grasped American musical theater conventions. For “Mother’s Getting Nervous,” performed by the Coopers’ children, he provided a boozy waltz that was hardly European. “Here I’ll Stay” was a warm ballad that could step out of the show (it has). And what is more American than a hoedown, wonderfully displayed in “Green-up Time,” a tribute to country life (in which JoAnn M. Hunter’s dancers shone). And yet, blue notes in “Green-up Time” and appropriate dissonances in “This Is the Life” (an ambivalent soliloquy on divorce) show that Weill retained some of his German heritage.

For the vaudeville sequences, which alternate with book scenes, Weill lent pizzazz to both “Progress,” which commented on Sam’s ambition, and “Economics,” which suggested that money may be the root of all divorces. To “Love Song”—an homage to Bert Williams’s vaudeville chestnut “Nobody”—he gave a brooding melody that reflected the alienation that the couple was experiencing in 1894. Sam sits passively while Susan champions women’s suffrage and complains of her “domestic jail.” As they continue to spar, both Coopers realize that their expectations aren’t being met and probably won’t be. In 1927, Sam tells many different businessmen what they want to hear in “I’m Your Man.” Susan decides he isn’t hers. (Some noted the musical similarity with “Me and My Baby” from *Chicago*, but Weill obviously got there first.) Still, the Coopers remain together until 1948. Susan, now the main breadwinner, likes *Brief Encounter*, the 1945 film about a wife who falls in love with someone else, which neatly portends their split.

Director Victoria Clark and co-adaptor Joe Keenan introduced elements that enraged purists—not just in the score, which added “Susan’s Dream,” originally cut out of town, and subtracted “Ho, Billy O!,” primarily because there was not enough time for musical preparation. Otherwise, the presentation showed no ill effects from the short rehearsal period available for Encores! productions. Purists had more gripes: The opening that originally featured a magician was given to the Coopers’ two children. Many grouched that kids couldn’t perform complicated magic tricks. (Well, they *did* have 150 years to learn. This show’s time-traveling premise doesn’t require logical development.) After the male quartet had seemingly finished “Progress,” why did women suddenly enter and sing? (Because they were intent on getting some for themselves.) Why change the second-act ballet from “Punch and Judy Get a Divorce” to “His and Hers: A Divorce Ballet”? (Because today’s audiences don’t know *commedia dell’arte*.) Why replace the minstrel show with a circus borrowed from *Lady in the Dark*? (Minstrel shows long ago wore out their welcome.) All wise choices and signs of smart direction.

Brian Stokes Mitchell and Kate Baldwin showed terrific chemistry at the start and carefully calibrated its ebb. Mitchell’s highlight was “This Is the Life,” Sam’s attempt to cheer himself after leaving his wife. Baldwin’s was “Mr. Right,” where she rivaled Lois Lane in wanting a Superman spouse. As the Cooper kids, Christopher Jordan and Andrea Rosa Guzman’s poor diction was redeemed by their dazzling tap dance. John Edwards garnered more cheers for “Love Song.”

Ultimately, this *Love Life* disappointed those who wanted an exact replica of the original, but how much sense would that make today? Alas, Encores’ little-known titles generally gross 30% less than famous ones, so the production needed to draw in the many non-Weill-centrics. And it worked. All seven performances played to a nearly full house.

Objections aside, *Love Life* made us wish that Kurt Weill could have lived to be 157.

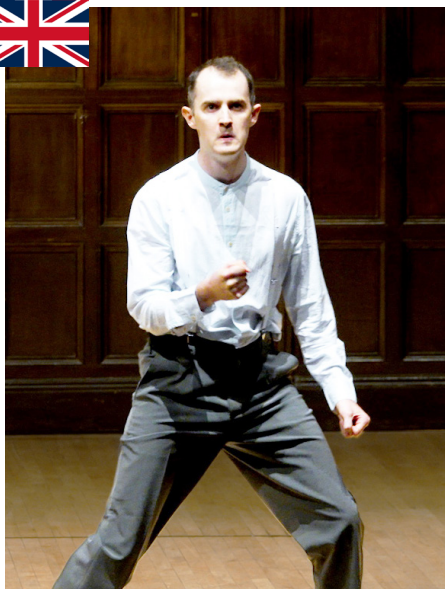
Peter Filichia
New York

ABOVE: Kate Baldwin and Brian Stokes Mitchell as Susan and Samuel Cooper
PHOTO: Joan Marcus



AROUND THE GLOBE

International Artists Sweep the 2025 Lenya Competition



First Prize (\$25,000)
George Roberts, U.K.



Second Prize (\$20,000)
Tamara Bounazou, France



Third Prize (\$15,000)
Elenora Hu, Netherlands

It has never happened before. In the Finals of this year's Lenya Competition, every prizewinner came from outside the U.S. (two from outside Europe). Long known for its international reach, the Competition has proven that its commitment to encouraging talented, versatile performers of opera and musical theater has taken root around the world. Two of the five winners had been finalists previously, exemplifying a feature of the articulated by former judge Ted Chapin: "Contestants who do not win prizes are allowed—encouraged—to come back."

First Prize winner George Roberts earned a nearly perfect score—a very rare occurrence—for his rendition of Weill's "Muschel von Margate." The judges enthused over this "phenomenal actor" and his "impeccable delivery of lyrics." Tamara Bounazou inspired the judges with her "huge range vocally and histrionically." One judge got to the heart of Elenora Hu's performance: "The voice of a star—simple and sincere."

An innovation for this year's event: the Audience Choice Award (\$3,000). Between the afternoon auditions and the awards presentation, each finalist sang one number not from their finals program; spectators present in the hall or watching via livestream then voted for their favorites. From a total of nearly 900 votes cast, the winner was Rebecca Madeira for "When He Sees Me" from *Waitress*.

As always, each finalist performed a continuous fifteen-minute program of four contrasting numbers drawing

on repertoire ranging from opera/opera to contemporary Broadway scores, including a selection by Kurt Weill. The annual Competition began with a round of video auditions—260 this year, 30% from outside the U.S.—followed by in-person auditions of twenty semifinalists in New York City in March. Adjudicator-coaches Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Vroman worked with each semifinalist; the top ten received invitations to the big event in Rochester. The rest is history.



An international affair: (from left) Gemma Nha, Queen Hezumuryango, George Roberts, Tamara Bounazou, Elenora Hu, Catherine Malfitano, Rob Berman, Alison Moritz, Ted Chapin, Brady Sansone

Let's Hear It from the Winners!

"The Competition fosters the kind of risk-taking and self-discovery that leaves a lasting imprint; it is an essential part of becoming the kind of artist I strive to be."

- Elenora Hu

"What drew me to the Competition was its championing of narrative above all else. It is a precious opportunity to tell all sorts of different stories across a mouthwatering mix of genres."

- George Roberts

"The [Lenya] organizers demonstrated remarkable respect and appreciation for each performer. This level of care and professionalism is unfortunately rare in our industry, and it made the experience even more meaningful."

- Tamara Bounazou

LENYA at a glance

LENYA COMPETITION FINALS
3 May 2025, Rochester, New York

First Prize (\$25,000)
George Roberts, U.K.

Second Prize (\$20,000)
Tamara Bounazou, France

Third Prize (\$15,000)
Elenora Hu, Netherlands

Outstanding Performance of a Selection by Kurt Weill (\$6,000)
Queen Hezumuryango, Burundi

Outstanding Performance of a Contemporary Musical Theater Selection (\$6,000)
Gemma Nha, Australia

All other finalists (\$3,000)
Crystal Glenn, Jonathan Heller, Olivia LaPointe, Rebecca Madeira, Schyler Vargas, Ian Williams

Competition Judges
Rob Berman
Catherine Malfitano
Alison Moritz

Host/Announcers
Brady Sansone, Ted Chapin

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Co-Production: Opera North & Kurt Weill Foundation for Music (Kim Kowalko, President & CEO)

Booklet insert includes libretto, essays, photos & more!

Recorded live at Leeds Grand Theatre, UK, January 2025
Produced by the BBC and first broadcast on BBC Radio 3

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Chris Hardman, recording assistant & editing, John Cole, recording assistant
Production Sound Design: Luke Swaffield for Autograph

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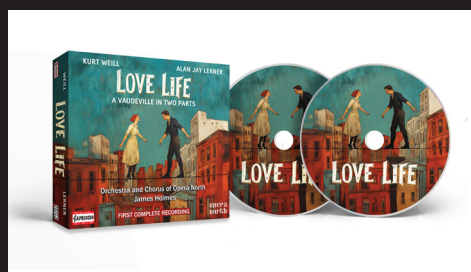
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