

Kurt Weill Newsletter

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WINTER 2025–26

FROM THE LENYA COMPETITION TO BROADWAY

Ted Chapin

I REMEMBER IT WELL: DISCOVERING WEILL AT YALE

Kim H. Kowalke

LATEST NEWS & REVIEWS

CASPAR NEHER

Weill's Indispensable Collaborator



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 3,500 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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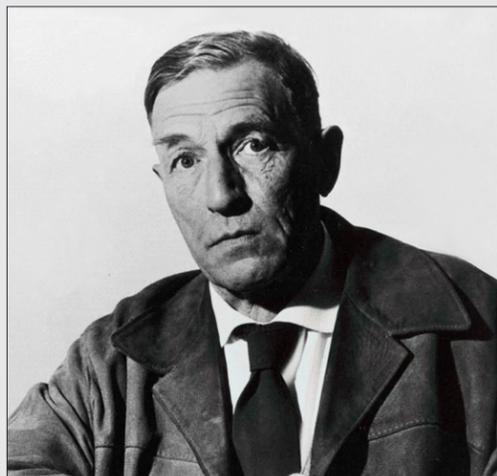
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ON THE COVER: Illustration of the artist at work
BELOW: Caspar Neher (1897–1962)



Editor's Note



Designer, director, librettist, friend, collaborator ... great artist Caspar Neher and great composer Kurt Weill formed an indissoluble bond beginning in 1927, when they joined forces for the first time on *Mahagonny Songspiel*. In 1930 and 1931 they worked together daily on their opera *Die Bürgschaft*, but the intense collaboration did not sour their friendship or their working relationship—quite the opposite. Always an essential collaborator for Brecht, Neher became one for Weill as well. We explore the heyday of their col-

laboration, 1929–1932, in the main feature article, with a generous helping of Neher's art.

Other highlights: from Ted Chapin, who conceived and co-produced the Broadway show *Just in Time*, a profile of Christine Cornish, one of the “Sirens” from the cast. She is a former Lenya Competition finalist who has made good—very good. Comments on *Der Silbersee* from the director of an upcoming production in Chicago. Kim Kowalke's eyewitness recollections of the ascent of *Happy End* to Broadway in 1977, inaugurating a series of firsthand accounts of decisive moments in Weill's performance or reception history. The news section provides a panorama of the celebration of Weill's 125th anniversary, with emphasis on new recordings.

I am grateful to all of my colleagues who have made this issue what it is, particularly Mike Gerard and Kim H. Kowalke.

Dave Stein

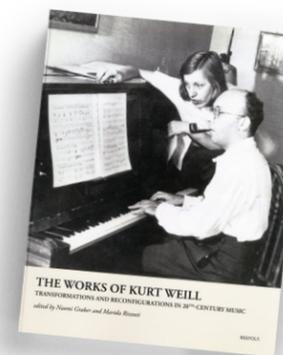
STILL IN PRINT

We thank all of our readers who have written in to express their views on the future of the *Newsletter*. After deliberations that took into account the full range of responses, we have decided to continue the print edition for the foreseeable future, in accordance with the wishes of an overwhelming majority of respondents. Of course the *Newsletter* will also be available online; as always, each issue will be placed on our site in PDF form at kwf.org/newsletter.

We continue to explore other means of delivering the *Newsletter* to all interested readers, including those who prefer the electronic version. We ask all subscribers to confirm their interest in continuing to receive printed copies and update postal addresses if necessary. We also ask all readers who prefer to read the *Newsletter* online to provide their e-mail addresses as we explore other means of distribution. Please address all correspondence to newsletter@kwf.org.



Special Offer for Our Readers



In our last issue, Jürgen Thym discussed *The Works of Kurt Weill: Transformations and Reconfigurations in 20th-Century Music*, ed. Graber and Rizzuti (Brepols, 2023), the published proceedings of a Weill conference held virtually from the University of Turin in May 2021 that featured many leading Weill scholars. The distributor has offered a special discount price of \$95.00 (list price \$144) to *Newsletter* readers; order from ISD using promo code 2997-26 at www.isdistribution.com.



PHOTO: Joan Marcus

Encores! Encores!

With performances that drew universal acclaim, Kate Baldwin and Brian Stokes Mitchell (pictured above) led the cast in last year's production of *Love Life* at New York City Center Encores! The cast and orchestra, led by conductor Rob Berman, have laid down tracks for a forthcoming one-CD cast recording that will include all the stars' solo numbers and other highlights from the score. Stay tuned for further news about label and distribution. The Foundation is providing substantial funding for the recording project under its Collaborative Initiatives program.

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Caspar Neher

Weill's Indispensable Collaborator

Text by Dave Stein and Kim H. Kowalke

As 1927 dawned, Weill's career was on the upswing. He had already committed his talents to music theater; the premiere of *Der Protagonist* in March 1926 had confirmed his status as a leading young German opera composer, and he awaited a joint premiere of two new works at the Berliner Staatsoper: *Royal Palace* and *Der neue Orpheus*. He was almost certainly unaware that the course of his career would soon change when he met Bertolt Brecht.

Along with Brecht came two other artists, writer and translator Elisabeth Hauptmann and designer Caspar Neher, both already essential members of Brecht's circle. Weill's commission for a chamber opera from a modern music festival in Baden-Baden prompted him to seek permission from Brecht and Hauptmann to use the "Mahagonny" poems from the poetry collection recently published under Brecht's name, *Die Hauspostille*. With Weill on the team, they prepared the production of *Mahagonny Songspiel*, Weill's settings of the "Mahagonny" poems with stage design by Neher. Neher's contributions, which included projected images, placards, and a boxing ring, contained several fundamental features of Brecht's "epic" theater style. Many scholars have pointed out the great

debt that Brecht's theories of theater owed to Neher's work.

The personal and professional connection between Weill and Neher that began in the spring of 1927 was likewise decisive, though it emerged gradually. Their work together included *Die Dreigroschenoper*—during rehearsals, Neher insisted that Weill retain the closing chorale when other observers wanted it cut—and *Happy End*, with Neher's stained-glass portraits of the "saints" of industrial capitalism: Ford, Morgan, Rockefeller. A turning point in their relationship occurred in 1929 as preparations began in earnest for the premiere of a full-length opera built on the *Songspiel*, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*.

By that time Brecht had become a full-blown Marxist and lost interest in opera, which he dismissed as "culinary," fit only to distract the bourgeoisie from rational consideration of pressing social and political issues. He had begun writing didactic plays (*Lehrstücke*) as a means of challenging audiences to think about the action onstage rather than losing themselves in it. It fell then to Weill and Neher to prepare for the world premiere of *Aufstieg* in Leipzig, which took place on 9 March 1930. Neher served not just as "scenic decorator" for

Mahagonny, but as co-author of its dramatic form.

In collaborating on the staging and revisions to the libretto, Weill and Neher forged a strong working relationship and deepened their friendship. The following summer, they took it to the next level when Weill brought Neher an idea for a new opera. Eighteen months later, that proposal premiered as *Die Bürgschaft*, a three-act opera with a libretto by Weill and Neher—though credited to Neher alone—that Weill subsequently regarded as one of his most important works.

A remarkable burst of activity followed, as they continued exploring possibilities for joint projects after the premiere of *Die Bürgschaft* in Berlin on 10 March 1932. They considered a series of cantatas and an opera for amateurs. When Georg Kaiser proposed *Der Silbersee* in July 1932, Weill took it for granted that Neher would also work on it, and he went on to design the Leipzig production. In December, Neher traveled to Paris to stage a double bill of *Mahagonny Songspiel* (with



Neher served as not just a scenic decorator for *Mahagonny*, but as co-author of its dramatic form.

interpolations from *Aufstieg*) and the "school opera" *Der Jasager*. An offer to compose a film score in January 1933 prompted Weill to insist that the production company hire Neher as well.

When Weill fled Nazi Germany in March 1933, Neher and his wife Erika helped him escape to France. A few months later, Neher risked his professional standing in Germany to design Weill's first work in exile, *Die sieben Todsünden*, despite having expressed distaste for Brecht's libretto. Over the next two years, Weill and the Neher family visited each other regularly and vacationed together. All that ended when he emigrated to the U.S. in 1935; the Neher family stayed in Germany, and Weill never saw them again. As Weill learned the ropes in a new country and ultimately became a Broadway mainstay, Neher maintained his position as one of Germany's leading stage designers. He



Neher's projection for the trial scene in Act III of *Aufstieg* shows a compromised figure of Justice with one eye peeking out from under her blindfold. Money outweighs a man's life on her scale.

also wrote librettos for three operas by Rudolf Wagner-Régeny, *Der Günstling*, *Die Bürger von Calais*, and *Johanna Balk*, all premiered in major houses.

Weill communicated with few of his German friends and colleagues after 1933, but he sought to get in touch with both Caspar and Erika soon after World War II ended. In his letters to Caspar, he proposed revisions to *Die Bürgschaft* and told him of challenges and recent success on Broadway. After Weill died, Neher designed sets for productions of three of his friend's works: the German premiere of *Street Scene* (Düsseldorf, 1955), *The Threepenny Opera* (London, 1956), and a radically revised version of *Die Bürgschaft* (Berlin, 1957). His stature was amply demonstrated by invitations to work at Covent Garden, Glyndebourne, and the Metropolitan Opera, where he designed sets and costumes for the company premiere of *Wozzeck* in 1959; that production was revived several times in the next three decades.

In retrospect it is tempting to see Weill's better-known work with Brecht as a springboard to a deeper, more artistically satisfying collaboration with Neher. Neher's love of opera contrasted starkly with Brecht's contempt, and Neher admired and abetted Weill's musical ambitions. As Lenya put it, "they liked each other instantly and became very, very close friends, in a way that Brecht and Kurt never did. ... Kurt never again met a stage designer whose work seemed the perfect match for his music." In turn, Weill encouraged Neher to move beyond his consummate skill as a designer to become a shaping force in the dramaturgy of their collaborations, a co-creator of a new mode of dramatic storytelling, and a stage director and librettist in his own right. For six immensely productive years, Neher was indeed Weill's indispensable collaborator.



In this depiction of Mahagonny as "Netzstadt" (city of snares), prostitute Jenny's seduction of the lumberjack Jimmy takes the form of capturing him in a butterfly net.

OPPOSITE PAGE: A portrait of Caspar Neher superimposed on the final projection from *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, showing the city in flames as a squadron of airplanes roars overhead.

All projection images reproduced with permission of Universal Edition, Vienna

Caspar Neher



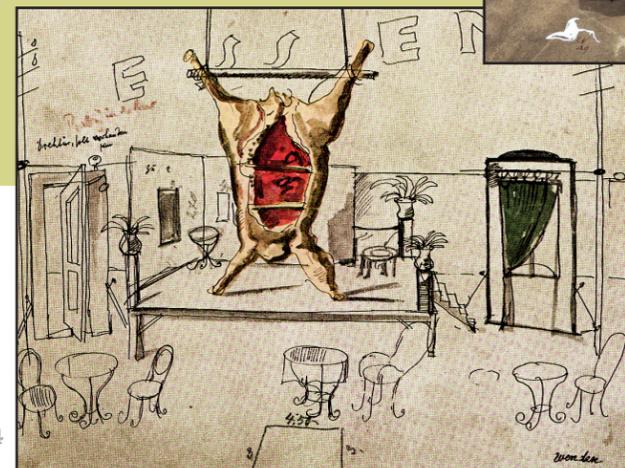
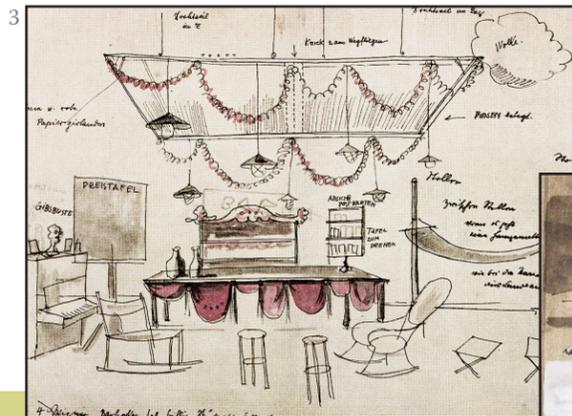
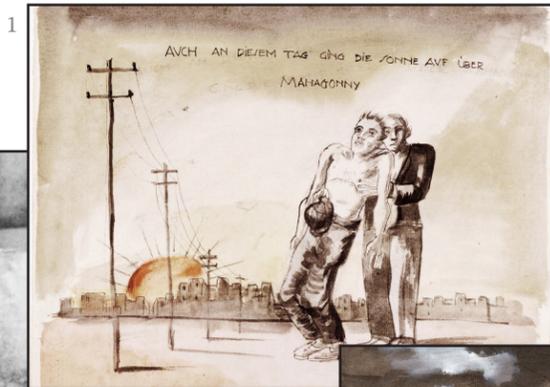
AUFSTIEG UND FALL DER STADT MAHAGONNY

A work with a very long gestation. Brecht first mentions a “Mahagonny” opera in his notebooks in 1924, and Elisabeth Hauptmann collected extensive source material during 1925 and 1926, mostly newspaper clippings about hurricanes, boxing, capital punishment, and other American exotica that were eventually funneled into the plot. Shortly after the performance of *Mahagonny Songspiel* in 1927, Weill, Brecht, and Hauptmann began serious work on the libretto of the full-length opera, which required more than two years, with time out along the way for other projects.

Weill’s correspondence shows that in June 1929, nine months before the premiere, he and Neher were working through the libretto in detail, making not only notes, but revisions. In the ensuing months, the pair created a guide to staging the opera, apparently without Brecht’s participation. The resulting document, “Suggestions for Staging the Opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*,” was provided to theaters along with other performance material as a necessary complement to the libretto. As in *Mahagonny Songspiel* three years earlier, Neher’s projections formed an essential component of the narrative, and they likewise became part of the performance material supplied by Universal Edition. Neher and Weill worked intensively with the director of the premiere, Walther Brüggemann, shortly before it took place. When *Aufstieg* premiered in Berlin in December 1931, Neher, already responsible for sets and costumes, took

charge as stage director after Brecht and Weill’s battle over the primacy of text or music caused their relationship to collapse. Neher, despite his longstanding friendship with Brecht, took Weill’s side.

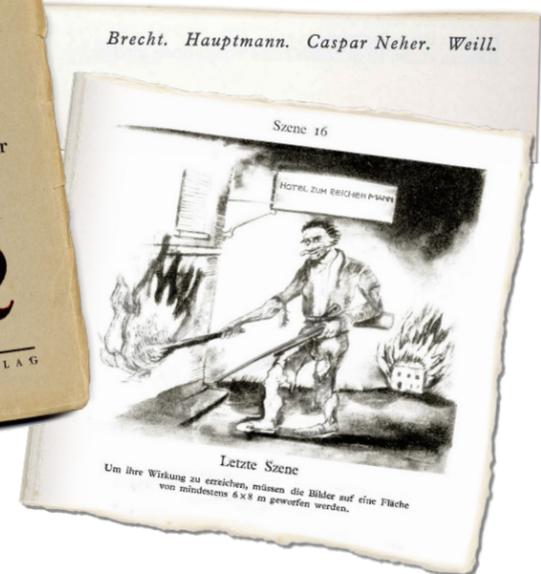
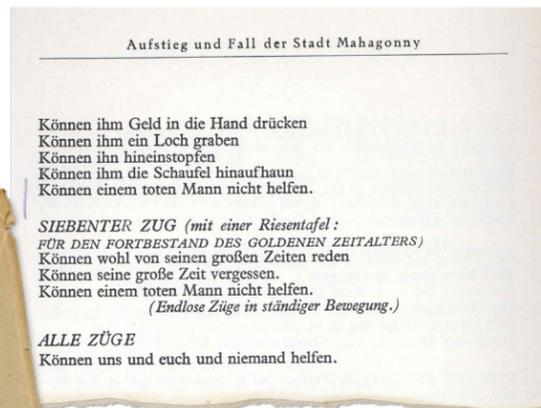
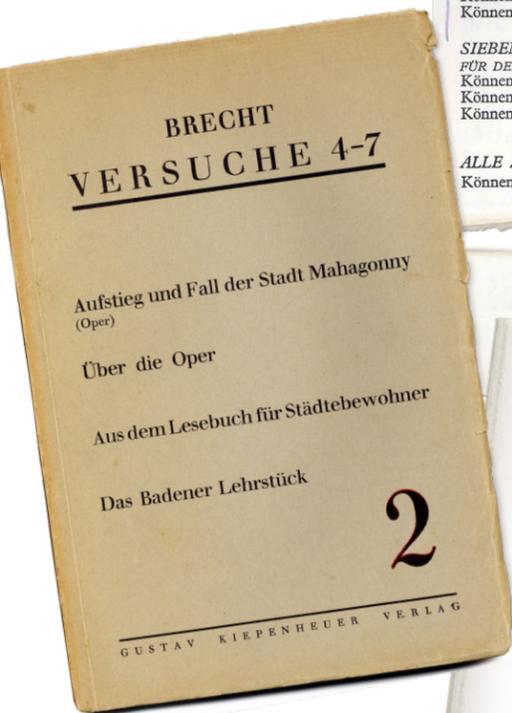
Aufstieg proved to be not just a new opera, but a new form of opera which could not have come into being without Neher’s contributions to both text and design. (His projected images became part of the text, cited frequently in the published libretto and vocal score.) Both Weill and Brecht stated unequivocally that *Aufstieg* could not exist without Neher’s contributions. Weill: “Caspar Neher’s projections are an essential part of the material going to make up the performance (and should accordingly be sent out to theaters along with the music). [They] provide an independent illustration of the events on stage. They supply visual aids to the history of the city ... The actor performs his scenes in front of the screen, and no more props are needed than are essential for him to clarify his performance.” Brecht: “These projections of Neher’s are quite as much an independent component of the opera as are Weill’s music and the text.” When Brecht published the libretto as part of his series of *Versuche* (experiments), he credited Hauptmann and Weill as he did elsewhere. For the first and only time, he added Neher’s name as *Mitarbeiter* due to his work on the libretto.



OPPOSITE LEFT: Caspar Neher, Berlin 1931
Courtesy of the Weill-Lenya Research Center (WLRC)

1. Jimmy is led to his trial at the beginning of Act III. The text reads, “On this day, too, the sun came up over Mahagonny.”
With permission of Universal Edition, Vienna
2. From Scene 8: the men smoke and fish while the women wait to be used. © Universal Edition
3. Drawing of a bar in Mahagonny (Scene 7), complete with price list on the left. Courtesy of WLRC
4. Drawing of the “gluttony scene” in Act II, during which one of the lumberjacks in Mahagonny eats himself to death. Courtesy of WLRC

5. Bored men, apparently indifferent to feminine charms, guzzle whisky. The scene suggests one of the opera’s mottos, “Aber etwas fehlt” (But something is missing). With permission of Universal Edition, Vienna
6. As discontent explodes in Mahagonny, residents gather with signs to protest. (The original libretto specifies slogans for the signs, which do not appear here.) © Universal Edition
7. The two leads, Jenny and Jimmy, sing the “Crane Duet,” a late addition to the score. With permission of Universal Edition, Vienna
8. Jimmy is put on trial and condemned to death for failure to pay his bar tab. Courtesy of WLRC



BRECHT'S CREDITS

Brecht's contract with Universal Edition permitted him to publish the libretto of *Aufstieg* in his "collected works." They were displeased, however, when he did so just eight months after the opera's premiere in Leipzig. Published in December 1930 as Volume 2 of his *Versuche* by Kiepenheuer, the revised libretto (adapted by Brecht and Hauptmann from UE's pre-premiere version) also included eight of Neher's drawings and projections and Brecht's "Notes on the Opera."

Each work in the volume carried a credit at the end. In the case of *Aufstieg* (shown at left): "Brecht. Hauptmann. Caspar Neher. Weill." Hauptmann was credited as co-author for seven other works in the *Versuche* series, Weill for three, Neher for no others, which confirms his unique contribution to the opera.

In 1949, when Brecht signed a contract with Suhrkamp making it the new agent/publisher for most of his dramatic works, a rider itemized his co-creators for each of them. Neher was again credited only for *Aufstieg*. Since 1949, authorized publications of this version have likewise confirmed Neher, Hauptmann, and Weill as co-authors of the libretto.



"Everything happens according to one law: the law of money, the law of power."

David Orth at the end of *Die Bürgschaft*

DIE BÜRGSCHAFT

The next step was one-on-one collaboration on a full-length opera, *Die Bürgschaft* (The Pledge, or The Bond), which Weill described to his publisher as "pure opera," springing from a different inspiration from that of *Mahagonny*. Weill came to Neher with the initial idea in the summer of 1930 and urged him to work on the libretto. From Neher's recollections in 1955: "Kurt said he was tired of only writing songs and wanted to do something with big choruses, on a grand scale. . . . Kurt came every day, [we] worked almost a year. Kurt had a very definite conception of what he wanted musically."

It proved to be Weill's lengthiest German score, providing vast scope for his musical imagination as well as a direct attack on totalitarianism, already visible on the German horizon. In 1955, Neher recalled the basis of the work: "*Bürgschaft* represents a picture of the German social setup at the time: inflation, Black Friday, the value of money, set against the story of two friends." Weill reported to his publisher that conductor Gustav Brecher called the libretto "the only path toward a new form of opera."

After its premiere, *Die Bürgschaft* sparked extensive debate in musical and cultural circles but saw only two more productions in 1932, primarily due to its attacks on the German right wing. Neher: "Ordinarily *Bürgschaft* would have been done in thirty or forty opera houses, but was actually done in four [*recte*: three]." Despite such constraints, the opera was not forgotten. In October 1933, Lenya wrote to Weill, "I have a tremendous longing to hear the music of *Die Bürgschaft*. It would be like a purifying bath in the River Jordan or the Ganges." The definitive modern production took place at the Spoleto Festival USA in 1999 and resulted in a complete recording issued on EMI, available on the Foundation's Youtube channel.



"The work is unified only by the blending of text and music throughout; no personal union between poet and composer could have produced a closer collaboration. . . . The opera wears the face of our time, but does not shake its fist at the times as *Mahagonny* does."

Alfred Einstein, *Berliner Tageblatt*, 11 March 1932

"Weill and Neher wrote not so much a *Lehrstück*, or didactic piece, but a *Warnstück*, or a work of warning. *Die Bürgschaft* is a passion play for the twentieth century, as relevant now as it was [in 1932]. We ignore its implications at our peril."

Jonathan Eaton, four-time director of *Die Bürgschaft*, in the Spring 1998 *Newsletter*

TOP: *Die Bürgschaft* takes place in the mythical land of Urb, where a new regime led by the Kommissar takes over in the middle of Act II. The Kommissar (seated) soon installs himself as dictator.

BOTTOM: The people of Urb endure war, inflation, hunger, and plague after the Kommissar takes power.

PROJECTIONS

"[The stage settings] were dominated entirely by the Caspar Neher pictures which were projected on a backdrop during and between the scenes, and clearly emphasized the Billingsgate tone of the whole. It is understood that these drawings, as well as the explanatory texts which preceded each episode like the captions to a moving picture, form an integral part of the work and must be included in the décor."

Geraldine de Courcy, *Musical America*, 10 April 1930

"The spectator can follow the story through the images, saving Brecht the work of plotting and writing dialogue. We need only the projection of a burning city to experience the downfall of Mahagonny."

Heinrich Wiegand, *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 11 March 1930

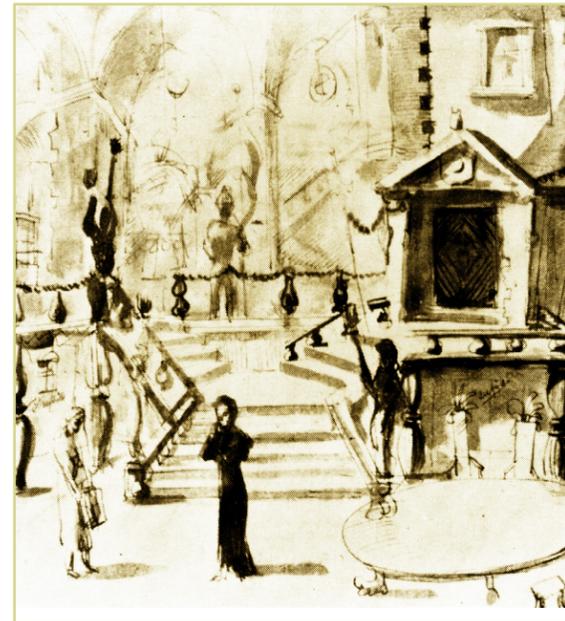
"[*Aufstieg*'s] poetry, music, and projected images came together at the cultural peak of the Weimar Republic (the years 1927 to 1929) to make something new: not a one-man Gesamtkunstwerk à la Wagner but a step in the direction of today's multi-media experiments."

John Willett, "The Three Elements of Mahagonny" in Christine Tretow and Helmut Gier, eds., *Caspar Neher – der grösste Bühnenbauer unserer Zeit* (Westdeutscher Verlag, 1997), p. 73

Neher contributed set and costume designs to Weill's last work in Germany, *Der Silbersee*, and his first in exile, *Die sieben Todsünden*, under trying conditions caused by the Nazis' rise to power. Three theaters in Germany opened *Der Silbersee* (The Silver Lake) on the same day, 18 February 1933, an act of great courage. Neher designed the production in Leipzig. The "ballet-chanté" *Die sieben Todsünden* opened 7 June 1933 in Paris. It was the last hurrah for the team of Weill, Brecht, Neher, and Lotte Lenya, who reunited to create the last of a string of remarkable works that had already reshaped German theater.

Der Silbersee

Most of the action of the second and third acts takes place in a castle owned by Olim, one of the two protagonists. Here, Neher's design shows that when he was not working with Brecht, he was quite capable of adopting different esthetics. Years later, director Detlef Sierck recalled, "Weill had written some really powerful songs which I think are among the best things he ever did. Caspar Neher's . . . sets were just out of this world. I think they are the best he ever did, better than anything he did with Brecht. But they are gone."



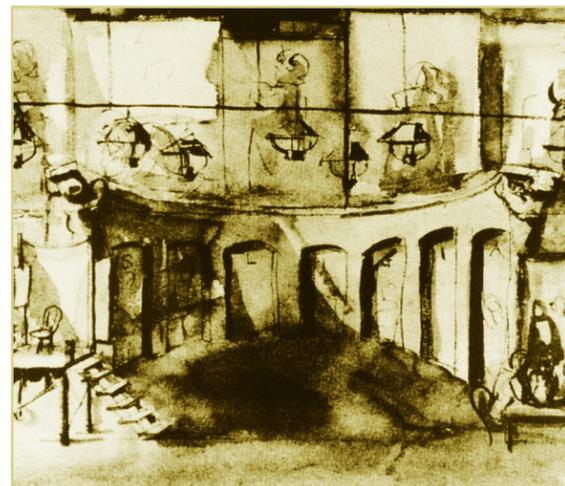
ABOVE: Sketch for Olim's Castle

Die sieben Todsünden

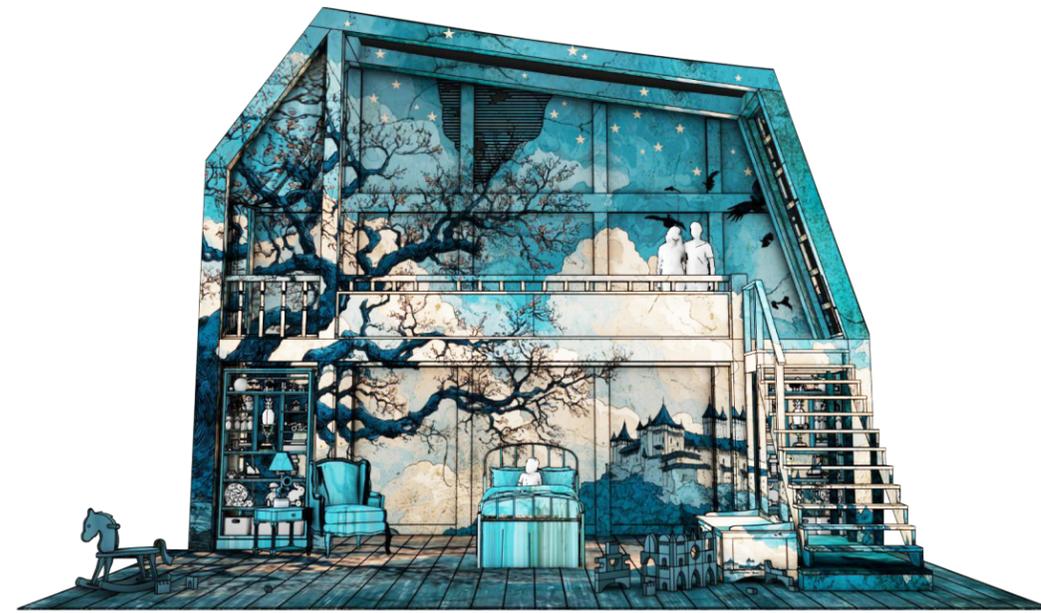


LEFT: Neher designed seven banners, one for each of the deadly sins of the title, for the original production in Paris. They hung well above the stage as a constant reminder to the audience of the theme of the work. This drawing was made as a sketch for the banner depicting Wrath ("Ira"). Weill's friend, composer Darius Milhaud, observed that "the movements of the *corps de ballet* fit perfectly within the atmosphere created by Neher's sets."

RIGHT: Neher's set design shows seven entrances to the stage, each surmounted by a banner



Images courtesy of WLRC



REFLECTIONS on *Der Silbersee*

Lawrence Edelson

When I first encountered *Der Silbersee* (The Silver Lake), I was struck not only by the circumstances of its creation, but by how enduringly it speaks to our own time. Premiering in 1933 as the Nazi Party rose to power, the work confronts a society at a moment of profound historical rupture. It was the last work Weill composed before his exile from Germany, and presenting *Der Silbersee* in its original language felt essential to honoring its historical and cultural context. We therefore decided to perform the work entirely in German, with judicious cuts to the dialogue to tighten the pacing, while preserving all of Weill's original music. English supertitles will be integrated into the set design at eye level, ensuring clarity without disrupting the theatrical experience.

In planning for the production, I often found myself reflecting on the work's subtitle, *ein Wintermärchen* (a winter's fairy tale). By cloaking a searing social critique in the language of a fairy tale, Weill and Georg Kaiser transformed political protest into poetic myth. Fairy tales are not escapist fantasies; they are vessels for moral clarity. They use the language of wonder to grapple with fear, loss, cruelty, and redemption, distilling these experiences into archetypes we recognize instinctively. Weill and Kaiser present the hungry man, the remorseful lawman, and the innocent guide, whose journeys embody the universal struggle between injustice and compassion, despair and hope. These figures are not abstractions of a distant past; they reflect patterns of human behavior that recur whenever societies experience extreme inequality and moral stress. What compelled me to produce this opera now is precisely this cyclical quality: the way history's patterns repeat unless we consciously interrupt them.

I also became increasingly interested in how fairy tales are first encountered—not as literary artifacts, but as stories absorbed

in childhood, when our moral compass is still forming. This led me to frame the entire opera as unfolding within a child's bedroom, not to render it childish, but to illuminate how innocence perceives moral truth. This is not an attempt to soften the opera's darkness, but rather to sharpen it. Children possess an extraordinary capacity to perceive injustice with unfiltered clarity. In our production, the child's bedroom becomes a space where everyday objects transform into entire worlds. Through this ongoing transformation, the opera's episodic structure coheres as a single psychological landscape where we can reflect on the question: How can we find reconciliation and hope in a fractured world?

Producing *Der Silbersee* today is an act of remembrance and of resistance. I hope our new production allows contemporary audiences to encounter the opera not as a historical artifact, but as a living moral inquiry—one that asks us, quietly but insistently, what kind of society we are choosing to become.

Der Silbersee
Chicago Opera Theater
4–8 March 2026

Lawrence Edelson, director
James Lowe, conductor

TOP LEFT: Scenic rendering by Jeffrey D. Kmiec
ABOVE: Costume renderings by Erik Reagan Teague



Mallwitz Scores

Big win for Joana Mallwitz's 2025 debut recording on Deutsche Grammophon with the Konzerthausorchester Berlin, which features both of Weill's symphonies and *Die sieben Todsünden*: First Prize in the Orchestral category of *Gramophone* magazine's prestigious Classical Music Awards. The album had already earned Mallwitz Opus Klassik's Conductor of the Year Award in 2025. She is scheduled to lead a performance of the *Fantaisie symphonique* (Symphony no. 2) in Munich with the Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks, 16–17 April 2026.



PHOTO: ENO

Another Year, Another Role

Danielle de Niese, whose impassioned portrayals of Anna I and II of *Die sieben Todsünden* have been chronicled recently in the *Newsletter*, has taken another plum Weill role. English National Opera's February 2026 staging of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* featured de Niese as Jenny. Sung in Jeremy Sams's English translation, the production was conducted by recently appointed Music Director André de Ridder and directed by James Manton. ENO last essayed *Aufstieg* in 1995.

Unstoppable Kosky

Barrie Kosky's groundbreaking Weill productions keep on giving. His acclaimed *Dreigroschenoper*, with the Berliner Ensemble, continues its march around the world this season with a tour to Shanghai (7–9 November) and Beijing (15–16 November). That marks the fifth continent to host a performance. Next stop for this production: Taipei in May. Those who prefer Kosky's work on *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* had an opportunity to visit, or revisit, his staging when Berlin's Komische Oper revived it for five performances in December and January.



Rightful Places

Three women who worked for Brecht, and co-created much of his work, are the subject of a new play premiered in September 2025. The lives and writings of Elisabeth Hauptmann, Ruth Berlau, and Margarete Steffin provide raw material for the play, "Ich bin ein Dreck" (I Am Garbage) by Laura Götz, Sinje Kortenhuis, and Max Latinski, staged at the Leipzig Cammerspiele. The authors note, "They all had a share in what we now call 'Brecht's work,' yet their achievements have gone and continue to go unrecognized."

80 Performances!

La ópera de los tres centavos (The Threepenny Opera) is set to see a lot of Spain. A new touring production opened 29 January on the island of Tenerife and is touring all over the country throughout 2026, with stops scheduled in Bilbao, Murcia, A Coruña, Valladolid, Madrid, and other cities, for a total of over eighty performances. Star singer and actor Coque Malla plays Mack the Knife, heading up a cast of nine actors. Mario Vega directs, and Malla's brother Miguel conducts. One report notes, "The onstage orchestra [is] an integral part of the narrative, interacting with performers and chiming in during crucial scenes."

A New Road

Die Verheißung (The Promise), an oratorio derived from Weill's monumental score for *Der Weg der Verheißung* (The Eternal Road) saw its premiere in 2013; the complete recording released on Navona Records captures a performance at Carnegie Hall in 2015. A new version, with Weill's orchestral score arranged for organ, percussion, harp, and strings by Bernhard Opitz, was performed for the first time in September 2025 in Kleinmachnow, a suburb of Berlin where Weill once lived, conducted by Karsten Seibt. The arrangement puts this stunning work within reach of synagogues and smaller performing organizations.

Gala Weill

The biggest event of the season for one of the leading U.S. orchestras featured one of our best known jazz singers performing "Barbara-Song" from *The Threepenny Opera*. Cécile McLorin Salvant placed the number on her program for the New York Philharmonic's 2025–26 opening gala, conducted by Anthony Parnter. She has performed the song many times, and her homage to Weill appeared in the Winter 2024 *Newsletter*.

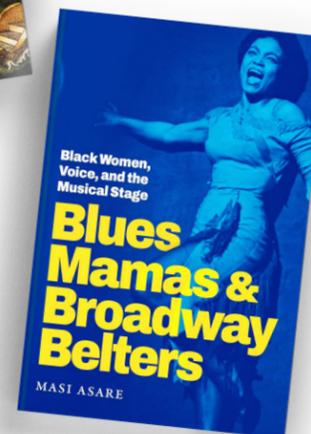
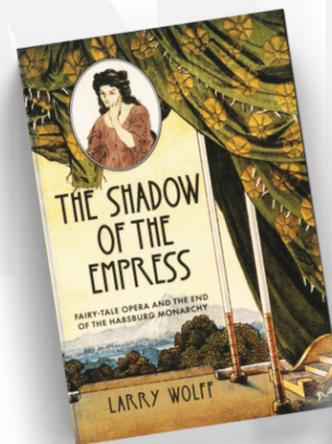


PHOTO: Wärmeke

PHOTO: Courtesy of Kristin Rausing

Horse of Another Name

Racing fans take note: an Irish horse has been named after Lotte Lenya. The Foundation gave breeder Kristin Rausing permission to use Lenya's name for the filly, who will likely begin racing in 2026. It's not the first time Lenya has been so honored. In 2015, Fergus Anstock also received permission to name a racehorse after Lenya. She did not have a long career, but perhaps this generation will do better. Meanwhile, what's next—a horse named Kurt Julian?



2025 Kurt Weill Prizes

Last year's Kurt Weill Prize panel faced the usual challenges in confronting an imposing list of scholarly books and articles published in 2023 or 2024. Fortunately, they rose to the occasion, as two books and two articles received recognition in 2025. The Kurt Weill Book Prize, bearing an award of \$5,000, went to Larry Wolff's *The Shadow of the Empress: Fairy-Tale Opera and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy* (Stanford Univ. Press, 2023). The judges praised Wolff's superior scholarship while noting that the narrative "will appeal to an academic readership as well as one far beyond." Masi Asare's book, *Blues Mamas & Broadway Belters: Black Women, Voice, and the Musical Stage* (Duke Univ. Press, 2024) won Special Recognition from the panel for its "pioneering approach" and "convincing demonstration of vocal theory through the history of many Broadway singers."

Two article winners each received an award of \$2,000: Joseph Cadagin for "Ligeti's Unfinished *Alice in Wonderland*" (*Perspectives of New Music*, Winter 2023) and Drew Nobile for "Sondheim's Dissonant Tonality," published in *Here for the Hearing: Analyzing the Music in Musical Theater* (Univ. of Michigan Press, 2023). The judges lauded Cadagin for "casting valuable insights into Ligeti's operatic esthetic, compositional methods, and stylistic preferences." Nobile drew honors for "laying the foundation, as few previous analytical studies have done, for a more comprehensive view of Stephen Sondheim's treatment of tonality."

The Kurt Weill Prize is awarded biennially by the Foundation to recognize distinguished scholarship in music theater since 1900, including opera and dance. Books and articles published during 2025 and 2026 will be eligible for the 2027 Prize; nominations accepted until 30 April 2027.



Ana Karneža

Happy Beginning for Weill/Lenya Artist

Winner of the 2024 Lenya Competition (see interview in the Winter 2024 *Newsletter*), Ana Karneža has been designated a Kurt Weill/Lotte Lenya Artist for her Weill stage debut this summer as The Fly—mastermind of Bill Cracker's gang—in a new production of *Happy End*. Both Saratoga Opera (late May) and Glimmerglass Opera (late July) will host performances; the production stems from a new partnership between the two companies. The show will also travel to nine cities, mostly in New York State but including Williamstown, MA, before the Glimmerglass performances. Discussions to revive the staging next fall are underway.

Karneža's casting comes as no surprise. The graduate of NYU Abu Dhabi and Juilliard has excelled in both drama and musical theater as well as television. Less than a year after taking First Prize in the Competition, she was invited to give an all-Weill song recital at the Kurt Weill Fest Dessau on Weill's birthday (2 March 2025). In the upcoming production she will sink her teeth into "The Ballad of the Lily of Hell" and perform other songs in the show.

Highways and Valleys

Intended for school and amateur performers, Weill and Arnold Sundgaard's opera *Down in the Valley* (1948) is presented infrequently by professional companies, even though it was once his most popular American stage work. In December 2025, Detroit Opera offered a brand-new production as part of a double bill ("Highways and Valleys: Two American Love Stories") with William Grant Still's *Highway 1, USA*. The cast featured Nicole Heaston (Jennie), Victor Ryan Robertson (Brack), and Davóné Tines (Bouché) under the direction of Kaneza Schaal. Schaal took full cognizance of the work's origins as a radio opera, framing the staging as a presentation of the "Detroit Opera Radio Hour" complete with old-time microphones. In *Musical America*, Hannah Edgar had words of praise for Amy Rubin's set (a "marvel"), the "gripping choreography" of Kiara Benn, and conductor Roberto Kalb's "assured hand." Lee DeVito of *Detroit Metro Times* noted, "The double bill highlighted voices often excluded from the operatic mainstream and placed American folk idioms at the center of the sound world."

Exceptional Editions

The Kurt Weill Edition continued its winning streak in 2025. The latest volume, *Der Silbersee*, edited by KWE Managing Editor Elmar Juchem, won the Music Publishers' Association's annual Paul Revere Award for Full Score Notesetting. That marks the ninth Edition volume to take the Award, an extraordinary testament to the skill and care with which the scores are engraved. It did not stop there in 2025, as another score produced by the Foundation took home a separate Paul Revere Award in the Piano-Vocal Music category. That would be the never-before published piano-vocal score of *Love Life*, based on the recent critical edition of the full score (which also won the Revere Award). The cued vocal score, prepared by John Baxindine with cover design by Mike Gerard, is issued under the imprint of Kurt Weill Music and distributed by Hal Leonard.

As the Edition continues its march through Weill's catalogue, get ready for the Symphonic Works volume, edited by James Holmes and due to appear later in 2026. It will include full scores, scholarly commentary, and critical notes for three works: *Symphonie in einem Satz* (Symphony no. 1), *Fantaisie symphonique* (Symphony no. 2), and the *Orchestersuite in E Major*, a student work published for the first time.



Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber
and Kyle Scatliffe

Masquerade Hires Five Lenya Winners

Not one, not two, but five former Lenya Competition prizewinners are taking part in *Masquerade*: Nkrumah Gatling, Cooper Grodin, Claire Leyden, Francesca Mehrotra, and Kyle Scatliffe. Scatliffe is one of the actors playing the Phantom, Mehrotra portrays Christine and Mme. Giry, while the others are members of the ensemble. The new show, reimaged by Andrew Lloyd Webber as a fully immersive production of *The Phantom of the Opera*, opened on 29 September 2025 in a space created especially for the performances on W. 57th Street in New York. Multiple actors play the lead roles, starting at different times during the evening, and audience members are full participants in the show, required to dress formally and wear masks. Many opera and musical theater productions have cast multiple Lenya winners, but five is a new milestone.



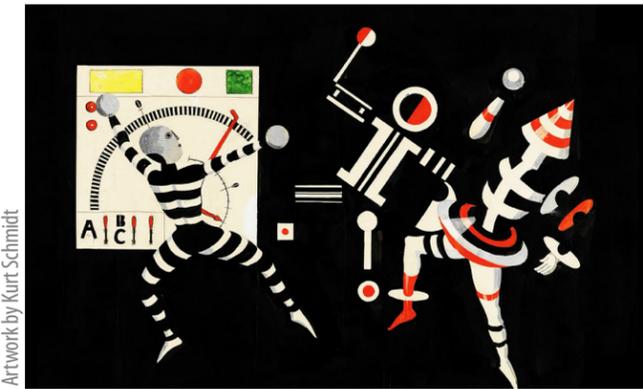
Hollywood Goes Weill

Although Weill's contributions to film music were not as extensive as he might have liked, his work continues to turn up in cinematic contexts, sometimes in surprising ways. Kent Jones's recent film, *Late Fame*, adapts a novel by Arthur Schnitzler to tell the story of a poet (Willem Dafoe) rediscovered forty years after his magnum opus by a group of young fans. They encourage him to give a reading and resurrect his famous book, "Way Past Go." One fan, singer-actor Gloria (Greta Lee, pictured with Dafoe above), seizes on the reading as an opportunity to perform, and she chooses "Surabaya-Johnny." According to *Variety*, she delivers it "with a primal cabaret power that turns the song into a four-minute autobiography." Almost one hundred years after it was written, Weill and Brecht's ballad of wronged love introduces itself to a new generation. So far the film has played only at festivals, but distributor Magnolia Pictures has acquired it for release during 2026.

One of Jones's mentors is Martin Scorsese, who recently made a fascinating confession: he loves the film version of *Lady in the Dark* (1944) and considers it a guilty pleasure as well as an influence. "The whole film is so vulgar and outrageous, there's got to be something to it ... the dream sequences are marvelous kitsch. I love the fantasy element." He went on, "I love the Kurt Weill-Ira Gershwin songs. I love 'Jenny'. For me, the whole film builds to the point where Ginger Rogers sings, 'Poor Jenny, bright as a penny'—and she opens her dress, and it's fur-lined and red. The film has influenced a lot of my movies. I screened it before shooting *New York, New York*, to look at the color and the use of lipstick, etc."



A window card from *Lady in the Dark* depicts Ginger Rogers.



World Premiere: *Parabola and Circula*

"The lazy love-sick queen!" The heroine of Marc Blitzstein's one-act opera *Parabola and Circula* is so described shortly before she is killed by a projectile. Set in a universe of shapes and shadows, the 1929 work was heard in full for the first time on 21 September 2025 at Berlin's Philharmonie with the Norrköping Symphony Orchestra under Karl-Heinz Steffens. The concert performance took place during the festival "Bauhaus Music," shortly after the Bauhaus Archiv und Museum für Gestaltung opened its doors for a symposium exploring connections with opera.

WEILL IN RECITAL from Edinburgh to Carnegie Hall

It is not news that Weill's songs turn up frequently in vocal recitals; it happens countless times, in venues great and small, every season. Here is a sampling of recent activity, which shows that several well-known singers have enriched their programs with Weill:

19 August 2025, Edinburgh International Festival: Mezzo-soprano Camilla Seale, "Surabaya-Johnny"

Keith Bruce wrote in *The Herald*: "Mezzo Camilla Seale's single choice of Kurt Weill's 'Surabaya-Johnny' ... was perhaps bolder than she realised, given the venue's history of memorable interpretations of the song, but her dramatic delivery amply justified it."

12 September 2025, Wigmore Hall: Mezzo-soprano Véronique Gens, "Saga of Jenny," "Speak Low."

Robert Hugill, *planethugill.com*: "In 'Speak Low,' ... the lyrical center of the song resonated to Gens' rather *chanson*-like treatment."

15 September 2025, Wigmore Hall: Tenor Benjamin Appl, "Berlin im Licht," "Youkali," "Moritat von Mackie Messer," "September Song."

Bernard Hughes, *The Arts Desk*: "Appl's sinister mock-innocence in 'Die Moritat von Mackie Messer' was genuinely chilling."

In a speech at the Philharmonie, Germany's president Frank-Walter Steinmeier paid tribute to the Bauhaus—a multi-disciplinary movement that was dissolved by the Nazis in 1933—as a symbol of liberal ideals and a bulwark against right-wing extremism. "Today we are seeing artistic freedom attacked in many liberal democracies," he said. "Let us stand up against this."

Parabola and Circula (libretto by George Whitsett) tells of a family of geometric forms whose harmonious universe is shattered by suspicion, hatred, and finally death. Blitzstein exploits kaleidoscopic harmonies and colorful orchestration that reveal his exposure to French neo-classicism, while Italianate melodies foreshadow his 1949 opera *Regina*. The innocence of the female victim, Circula, is evoked with dreamy textures, while menacing percussion ushers in the sinister character of Prism, who spreads doubt and confusion.

Earlier that day, soprano Camilla Tilling and a quintet of musicians including clarinetist Sharon Kam presented a program juxtaposing songs by Blitzstein with those of Weill and instrumental works by Hindemith, Bernstein, and Antheil. The concert offered a welcome opportunity to consider the dialogue between European and American composers in the first half of the twentieth century. Trained on both continents, Blitzstein was a crucial participant.

Rebecca Schmid

4 November 2025, Kennedy Center: Mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke, "Youkali."

Cooke commented in an interview with WETA: "Weill's 'Youkali' is on the program and here you have a Jewish composer fleeing the rise of Nazism writing about a land of possibility and hope while using a tango rhythm. That is what I love about music—it is made up of stories from around the world, and that is what America is all about."

2 December 2025, Carnegie Hall: Mezzo-soprano Kate Lindsey, "Nannas Lied," "Thousands of Miles," "Big Mole," "Denn wie man sich bettet, so liegt man," "Buddy on the Nightshift," "Berlin im Licht," "Don't Look Now, but My Heart Is Showing," "Barbara-Song," "Pirate Jenny," "Je ne t'aime pas," "Lonely House," "We'll Go Away Together," "Trouble Man."

John Yohalem of *Parterre Box*: "For 'Pirate Jenny' and the 'Barbara-Lied [sic]' from *Threepenny Opera*, Lindsey was in hardbitten mode, reminding us that Brecht and Weill presented unsentimental views of the ordeals and the courage of women of the back alleys. Today, they are rightly seen as revelatory: the overlooked females are being noticed, and such songs appear in a proper heroic light."

16 January 2026, University of California, Berkeley: Mezzo-soprano Samantha Hankey, "Speak Low," "Youkali."

Joshua Kosman, *On a Pacific Aisle*: "Hankey and pianist Myra Huang gave [the songs] a fluid, easy swagger that segued into seductiveness and out again with perfect assurance."

So Many Recordings, So Little Time

The second half of 2025 saw a terrific run of acclaimed and widely publicized recordings of Weill's music, and the trend continues unabated into 2026. Could there be a better way to honor the 125th anniversary of Weill's birth? Available on physical media (CD, vinyl, or both) and streaming services, the albums include:



Love Life, Opera North, complete live cast recording (Capriccio C5550), 2 CDs, released October 2025: See review on p. 18. The CD booklet includes production photos from 2025 and 1948; essays by Joel Galand, editor of the critical edition of *Love Life*, and Kim H. Kowalke; and the complete dialogue and lyrics presented on the recording. Early critical reactions:

- Norman Lebrecht (*Slipped Disc*): “Opera North deserve a Tony for this achievement.”
- Manuel Brug (SWR German radio): “Finally the last gap in the Weill discography is filled perfectly. About time.”
- Seth Colter Walls (*New York Times*): “great Weill music ... the cast here, alongside Opera North’s orchestra and chorus, does justice to Weill’s feel for Americana.”



Die sieben Todsünden and works by Hindemith, Korngold, Schoenberg (Ensemble Modern Medien), scheduled for release March 2026: Wallis Giunta and HK Gruber team up with Ensemble Modern, an orchestra that has been performing Weill with dedication and acclaim since the 1980s. This studio recording preserves the complete program prepared for Carnegie Hall’s Weimar Republic festival and performed there in April 2024 (see Spring 2024 *Newsletter*). Here Giunta sings Brecht’s original German text in this world premiere recording of the frequently performed fifteen-player version of Weill’s score, prepared in 2019 by Gruber himself with Christian Muthspiel.



Dans notre nuit (Mirare MIR780, released September 2025): Soprano Margaux Poguet, fresh out of conservatory, is already making a name for herself as a Mozart specialist. Yet for this debut recording, she has selected a program of songs by Berg, Ullmann, and Weill, accompanied by piano and double bass. Of the three composers, Weill is best represented, with a total of nine songs from the French and German catalogues. Poguet commented, “I love this repertoire deeply, and it has been my companion for years now.” Radio France: “Mix art songs with jazz bass? Margaux Poguet takes up the challenge in her first album ... Discover an artist who puts her singing to work telling stories.”



Die sieben Todsünden, *Der neue Orpheus*, Violin Concerto (BIS 2779), released January 2026: Two redoubtable Weill performers have collaborated again with predictably remarkable results. Mezzo-soprano Wallis Giunta, already widely recognized as one of the world’s leading Annas in *Die sieben Todsünden*, records the role with the Swedish Chamber Orchestra under the baton of HK Gruber. Here she sings the part in English. Gruber’s longstanding connection with the SCO has already produced an album of both of Weill’s symphonies. The orchestra, not content with one Weill masterpiece, offers an account of the oft-recorded Violin Concerto with soloist Benjamin Herzl, along with the rarely recorded cantata/concertino *Der neue Orpheus*, which features both soprano and violin soloists against an orchestra without violins. For this work, SCO concertmaster Katarina Andreasson is the solo violinist and Jennifer France sings the solo part, the story of a modern-day Orpheus struggling to make music in a hostile urban environment.

The album is already racking up rave reviews. For example, Geoff Brown in the *Times* of London: “Gruber’s handling of his orchestra is almost beyond superb. I can’t recall ever hearing Weill played with such clarity and understanding, with such tender phrasings and such potent emotional colourings.”

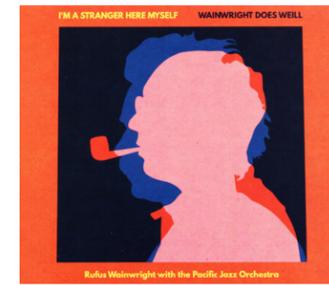


In Search of Youkali (Chandos CHAN 20359, released January 2026): British mezzo-soprano Katie Bray, backed by piano, double bass, and accordion, has thoughtfully assembled a Weill program that culminates in one of his best-loved songs, the tango “Youkali” composed in 1934 and outfitted with lyrics by Roger Fernay the following year. More than a Weill recital, the program includes at intervals short improvisations that center on the melody of “Youkali” to augment a “brilliantly devised programme in which the listener seems to be inexorably drawn to the final track” (*Gramophone*). In *The Guardian*, Erica Jeal enthused, “As for Bray, she is outstanding [f]rom the deliciously acerbic ‘Barbara-Song’ to the bleakly controlled emotion in ‘Je ne t’aime pas.’” Bray, a longtime Weill fancier, commented, “Weill had an astonishing gift for melodies, especially in his most wistful, dreamy songs. I’m thinking of “Youkali” in particular ... that haunting, painfully beautiful melody set to an hypnotic tango.”



Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny (label and release information to be announced): One more from the Giunta-Gruber team! Coming up in Leipzig, the site of the world premiere: a concert performance of Weill, Brecht, Elisabeth Hauptmann, and Caspar Neher’s opera set for October 2026 will be recorded live as part of the ongoing festival, “Year of Jewish Culture in Saxony.” Gruber will lead the Gewandhaus Orchestra, and his “dream cast” will include Giunta as Leokadja Begbick, Lauren Michelle (Kurt Weill/Lotte Lenya Artist for this project) as Jenny, and Mirko Roschkowski as Jim. Not only is a commercial release of the live recording in the offing, but filmmaker Ruth Beckermann has expressed interest in making a documentary about the opera starting with its 1930 premiere and culminating in the October performances almost a century later.

On 22 February 2026, Gruber made an appearance as vocalist in Leipzig with pianist Kirill Gerstein in a program of songs by Weill and Eisler. The event, titled “Berlin im Licht: ein Anti-Lieder Abend” might serve as a foretaste of the *Aufstieg* performances; it included two of the best-known numbers from the opera, “Alabama-Song” and “Denn wie man sich bettet, so liegt man.”

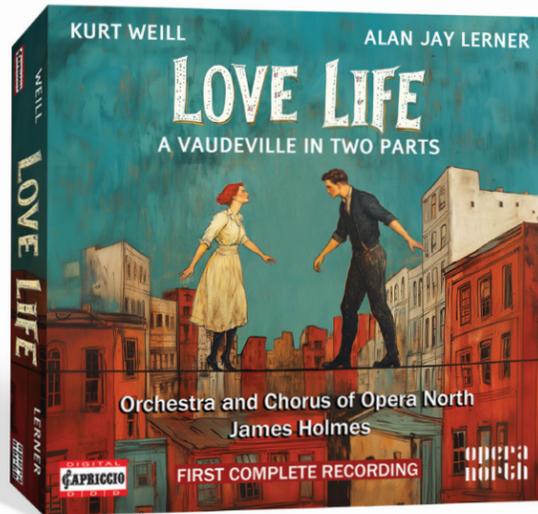


I’m a Stranger Here Myself: Wainwright Does Weill (Rock and Roll Credit Card RRCC01CD, released November 2025): The *Newsletter* has been observing Wainwright’s Weill forays, first at Café Carlyle in 2023, then last year with the Pacific Jazz Orchestra. The latter concert forms the basis of this new recording, which includes thirteen songs recorded live on Weill’s 124th birthday (2 March 2024). Wainwright has been outspoken about his lifelong admiration for Weill: “Be it the opening trap of ‘Mack the Knife’ or the closing explosion of ‘Lost in the Stars,’ this wondrous musical journey began, continues, and will never end.” As for the rapturous reviews, one excerpt from the *Times* of London’s list of the best albums of 2025 so far will have to suffice: “His approach is entirely suited to Weill’s glamorous theatricality. Listening to him pour the feeling into ‘September Song,’ you feel this really is the music closest to Wainwright’s heart” (Will Hodgkinson, 3 December 2025).



Just in Time original cast recording (Atlantic 075678593444, released October 2025): Currently one of Broadway’s hottest tickets, the Bobby Darin biomusical (see profile of Christine Cornish on p. 21) has naturally spun off a cast album, led by charismatic star Jonathan Groff singing his way through the high spots of Darin’s catalogue. Yes, that includes “Mack the Knife,” which closes the first act of the show with a bang. Groff’s rendition here joins at once any list of great recordings of the number (and we each have our own). The cast album earned a Grammy Award nomination for Best Musical Theater Album. Reviewer Michael Portantiere (castalbumreviews.com) wrote, “[Groff’s] alternately smooth-as-silk and truly exciting renditions of the classic songs ... will make it easy for listeners to understand why he received a Tony Award nomination for this stunning star turn.”

More *Just in Time* news: Groff has announced he will leave the show on 29 March 2026. Now the question of who will replace him has been answered: Jeremy Jordan, currently playing Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* on Broadway. Director Alex Timbers: “We’re excited to tailor the show to Jeremy’s many gifts and make a version of the show unique to him.”



LOVE LIFE CD

A musical ahead of its time, at last heard clearly

Opera North cast recording
James Holmes, conductor
Capriccio C5550 (2 CDs)

This is the one that got away. The 1948 collaboration between Weill and Alan Jay Lerner wasn't quite a failure at the time—it managed 252 performances at New York's Forty-Sixth Street Theatre—but a musicians' strike forestalled an original cast recording, and it quickly faded from view. Yet some numbers became part of the Weill canon, and it held a perennial fascination for artists like Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim who were reinventing the musical. As time has gone on, we have become more alert to the innovations of this remarkable piece, which may account both for its original mixed reception and for its potential for revival today.

No company has done more, more consistently and stylishly, for Weill than Opera North, the U.K. company based in Leeds. It has revived *Love Life* twice: first in 1996 in a reworking that didn't quite work, and last year in a first-class semi-staged outing that respected both the score's potential and the book's odd dramatic structure. The 2025 production, broadcast by BBC Radio 3, forms the basis of this superb live recording.

We cannot understand or appreciate *Love Life* properly without observing that its creators described it as a vaudeville, not as an opera or musical. In this context one must voice regret that there has been no video release, since Matthew Eberhardt's excellent, economical production clarified the structure vividly. (Editor's note: A video is in the works.) In a set of sequential scenes mixing genres and styles, with a magic act providing a frame and binding the work together, it doesn't quite tell a story, but instead provides snapshots of a marriage across the decades from 1791 to the then-present of 1948. Sam (Quirijn de Lang) and Susan (Stephanie Corley) Cooper, and their two children, do not age but must continually confront changing standards and morals. The whole is set up by the magician (Themba Mvula) and involves the central couple in emotional contortions leading to divorce before the final scene's uneasy resolution in a tight-rope walk.

To Lerner's clever but arguably over-ingenious framework, Weill brought his trademark mix of sharp-edged parody,

romantic sweetness, and brutal confrontation. There are some familiar tropes: the spouses' diametrically different recollections in "I Remember It Well," beautifully captured here; the punchy wit of "Economics" with its refrain of "That's good economics/ But awful bad for love." Susan becomes a suffragette, and the most powerful numbers come after their separation: "Is It Him or Is It Me?," very touchingly done by Corley, and Sam's cynical hymn to solitude "This Is the Life," a knockout number for de Lang which he dispatches with power and clarity.

Alongside these central numbers there is a mock-madrigal, a trio for three tots, a solo for a passing hobo (Justin Hopkins, recorded slightly too far back), and most famously "Susan's Dream," cut during try-outs and restored here in Part II. (The text may come across as condescending, but it provides a wistfully show-stopping melody.)

Central to the success of this recording is the placement of the Orchestra of Opera North onstage for the performances. The musicians are alert to every twist and turn of the music under James Holmes's idiomatic direction. They know this style well;

the playing is energized and atmospheric, especially in set-pieces like the pungent Divorce Ballet, and captures the little touches of Weill's orchestrations, like the genius move of inserting a trumpet echo of "Here I'll Stay" at the end of the rambunctious Part I finale. Weill veteran Holmes paces and drives the score perfectly. In a suggestive comment in the performance program, he wonders whether the piece failed to connect with audiences because "its view of 'life' and 'love' was tinged with a cynicism that post-war theatregoers wished largely to avoid."

If that is so, then perhaps the piece is finding its moment. What it surely needs, now that the idea of a "concept musical" is firmly embedded in audiences' experience, is a Broadway producer who will risk the full resources needed to stage this quirky, thought-provoking, pioneering show and bring it back to lovable life.

Nicholas Kenyon

Nicholas Kenyon is Chief Opera Critic of the *Telegraph*, and a former Director of the BBC Proms and the Barbican Centre.

MAHAGONNY

A Production Without Walls and Without Limits

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny
Berliner Staatsoper, July 2025
Theater Basel, August–October 2025
Benedikt von Peter, director
Stefan Klingele, conductor

Von Peter's staging premiered in Berlin and moved a month later to Basel, with the same concept but different cast and orchestra. Back in 2012, he tried out a similar idea in Bremen. This environmental, or immersive, production eliminated the familiar division between spectators and singers by making the action unfold all over the theater, even outside the building. ("The entire house is a stage!" proclaimed one reviewer.) The singers, chorus, and orchestra wore mics and were shadowed by camera operators (à la Ivo van Hove), and the action showed on screens placed all around. The only thing that stayed put was the orchestra seated onstage. Audience members did not have assigned seats and could go anywhere. That led to confused spectators and limitations on sound quality.



Evelyn Herlitzius and Artur Garbas PHOTO: Thomas Aurin



PHOTO: Ingo Höhn

Michael Laages, nachtkritik.de (Basel)

"It is all thought through extremely cleverly, and follows, with its own expressiveness, the truly overpowering dramaturgy of the original."

Peter Sommeregger, klassik-begeistert.de (Berlin)

"Von Peter's idea sounds great, but it doesn't really work in practice. The opera all but disappears behind the extravagance of the realization."

Alexander Dick, Badische Zeitung (Basel)

Well into the first act, I'm standing in the lobby, where audience, chorus members, and soloists mingle. Am I supposed to—join the action? Sing along? Talk to them?

Martina Kaden, BZ-Berlin

Exhausting and terribly strenuous. Wear your gym clothes!

Lynn Sophie Guldin, Das Opernmagazin (Berlin)

It becomes completely impossible to take it all in at once, or to perceive any inner meaning underneath the welter of detail.

Svenja Koch, bachtrack.com (Berlin)

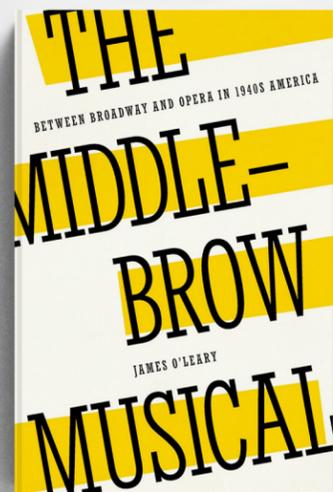
You can hear everything, but the sound is flattened out. If you can manage to observe the singers close up and hear their unamplified voices, you'll have an entirely different experience.

Peter Uehling, Berliner Zeitung

[The orchestra] is astonishingly well coordinated with the soloists and the well-coached chorus.

Holger Jacobs, kultur24.de (Berlin)

Minimal décor (Katrin Wittig), as the site of action constantly moves. Wild costumes (Geraldine Arnold) for the inhabitants of Mahagonny—outrageous clothes and gravity-defying wigs—but rather boring outfits for the main characters, after they shed their glittering outer layers.



THE MIDDLEBROW MUSICAL: Between Broadway and Opera in 1940s America

James O'Leary

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2025)
ISBN: 978-0-19-026521-2

James O'Leary begins this remarkable book with a conundrum that often drives groundbreaking musicological research: "what I thought I knew about the mid-century Broadway musical did not fit with what I was hearing in it" (p. ix). The resulting "journey" led from the piano bench into the intellectual discord around American art and popular culture between the wars. There he found that the Broadway musical, far from the sidelines of the debate, "was, in fact, a central player" (p. xiv) in the critical period of the mid-1940s.

This claim forms the foundation for a compelling new framework for understanding what O'Leary refers to as the two "revolutions" in 1940s musical theater: one obvious, *Oklahoma!* (1943); the other obscure, comprising three shows that opened within a three-week period in December 1946 and January 1947: *Beggar's Holiday*, *Street Scene*, and *Finian's Rainbow*. The commentary surrounding these shows forms a whole greater than the sum of its parts, supporting O'Leary's bracingly original argument that the term "integration" carried connotations at the time that have since been lost. Long understood as a tighter synthesis of music, words, dance, costumes, and sets, the term instead connoted efforts to create a balance among three spheres of modern American culture: high art, popular art, and folk art.

That theme comes into focus as O'Leary explores an American intellectual landscape between the wars in which two figures loomed large: Dwight Macdonald and Van Wyck Brooks. Macdonald famously deployed the word *middlebrow* to define what he regarded as the promiscuous mixing of high, popular, and folk art. He believed that his "oppositional" modernism, as O'Leary dubs it, would challenge the cultural complacency and political conformity that middlebrow arts encouraged. In contrast, Brooks argued that such mixture was precisely what should define American arts, because it would advance the sense of a shared culture—a view that O'Leary calls "affirmative" modernism. He does a first-rate job reviving the salience of Brooks's vision as he explores other critics, much closer to the Broadway scene, who shared it, particularly Brooks Atkinson, *New York Times* theater critic from 1922 to 1960. In Chapter 2, O'Leary recreates the critical networks that linked Broadway creators and observers such as Atkinson to the larger intellectual currents that Macdonald and Brooks represented.

O'Leary convincingly demonstrates that Brooks's middlebrow mix holds the key to the meaning of "integration"

embodied in Rodgers and Hammerstein's work; the formal integration for which they have been recognized for over eighty years served merely a supporting role. In this revisionist narrative, *Oklahoma!* offers a viable, compelling fusion, producing a "heightened realism" that O'Leary's "second revolution" seeks to develop. The two subsequent chapters show creators struggling to find new ways to merge high and popular idioms. Terminological anxiety (e.g., "folk operetta," "Broadway opera") becomes a recurring trope.

Thus, Duke Ellington dubbed *Beggar's Holiday* "A Parallel in Tempo to John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*." Exploring the commentary around Ellington after his monumental *Black, Brown, and Beige* premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1943, O'Leary sets the stage by citing "hot jazz" promoter John Hammond's criticism of Ellington's compromises—echoing Macdonald—whereas Alain Locke, the Brooks-inspired intellectual leader of the Harlem Renaissance, embraced Ellington as a "pioneer" of distinctive musical fusions.

Enter Kurt Weill, whose German and American careers once seemed irreconcilable. Weill's work stands as a continuous transatlantic effort to navigate "seemingly incompatible positions between high art and popular culture" (p. 142) and regularly recalibrates the balance among opera, two kinds of operetta (satirical and sentimental), and musical comedy. Weill himself promoted *Street Scene* as a "Broadway opera," both a marketing strategy and artistic banner to seize the high ground in an ongoing competition with Richard Rodgers, even if Rodgers was unaware of it.

Finian's Rainbow, one of the "second revolution" shows, gets no further attention, but that has no effect on the primary argument. O'Leary's deep dive into fourteen different archives brings intellectual richness and historical nuance to his claims. The writing boasts a clarity and precision sharpened by a marked tendency toward binary and dialectical thinking, with a profusion of ordinal numbers ("First ... Second ...") and contrasting formulations. Just right for a book that, in highlighting oppositions, restores rich and positive connotations to the oft-maligned middlebrow. In a world bifurcated by Brooks's distinction between "highbrow" and "lowbrow," the "compromising" middlebrow takes its place as an esthetic stance that resonated with large audiences in the past and endures with scholars and audiences today.

Jeffrey Magee
University of Illinois



"I've found my way..."
FROM THE LENYA COMPETITION TO BROADWAY

Ted Chapin

A 2015 Lenya finalist is currently changing in and out of eighteen costumes every night on Broadway in *Just in Time*. As one of the three "Sirens" who support Jonathan Groff's Bobby Darin, she is not a typical Lenya finalist, if such a phrase means anything. Most start as singers and/or actors and work to blend the two into a performer who can "do it all." Christine Cornish started as a dancer.

By her own admission, Christine gained enormous benefits from the Lenya process. Long-legged, warm-hearted, blonde, and stunning, she started with ballet in her native Dallas but decided to expand her horizons by going to the Musical Theater program at the prestigious Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. Much to her surprise, she was cast as Polly in *The Threepenny Opera* by Robin Guarino, longtime friend of the Kurt Weill Foundation. Clearly, Guarino saw a multi-talented performer who could play the role. But Christine did not know *Threepenny Opera*. Was it really an opera? A musical? And who is Polly? For that matter, who is Kurt Weill? Her curiosity brought her to the Foundation's website (kwf.org) where she learned a lot about Weill—and noticed the Competition. Why not give it a shot? She made the required audition tape and sent it in.

Although she didn't make the cut, she was encouraged to submit again the following year. (One of the program's best features.) That gave her the confidence to work with her voice teacher and acting coach to come up with an interesting set of songs. It worked; next time, she made the semifinals and received coaching from singer Judy Blazer and musical director Andy Einhorn. Both were enthusiastic about her talents and provided helpful guidance. Did she have the chops to make it as a fully rounded professional musical theater performer? Dancing was a natural. But the rest ... ?

She went on to the Finals that year. Although she didn't place, the experience changed her. A lengthy conversation with judge Rebecca Luker (whose recordings she had admired in high school) was inspiring. Luker treated her as an equal and imparted helpful observations about singing within the context of a show.

The next summer, Christine played Laurey in *Oklahoma!* at the St. Louis Muny. Drawing inspiration from the film of the Royal National Theatre production in which Josefina Gabrielle acted, sang, and danced the role (traditionally a dancer takes over for the ballet) she figured she could do likewise. Conductor Kevin Stites noted the Lenya Competition on her résumé. I saw that production, and she was wonderful. Filling the stage of an outdoor theater with 11,000 seats is no easy task, but her performance was clear and precise, and the dancing glorious.



Her career continued, heading for Broadway where she was cast as Bombalurina in the revival of *Cats*—a role that demands both a high soprano and jazzy belt on top of the dancing. Then came *My Fair Lady* at Lincoln Center Theater, *Kiss Me, Kate* at Roundabout, and the show that is on most every musical theater performer's résumé: *Chicago*. She played Hunyak and understudied Velma. All the while, she was taking classes at Steps studio, where she met Shannon Lewis. When Shannon was hired to choreograph *Just in Time*, Christine came to mind. The three "Sirens," back-up dancers and muses to Jonathan Groff and the character of Bobby Darin, developed into an essential part of the show, and Christine was a natural choice. Director Alex Timbers agreed.

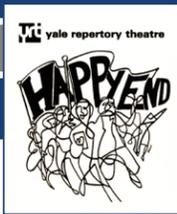
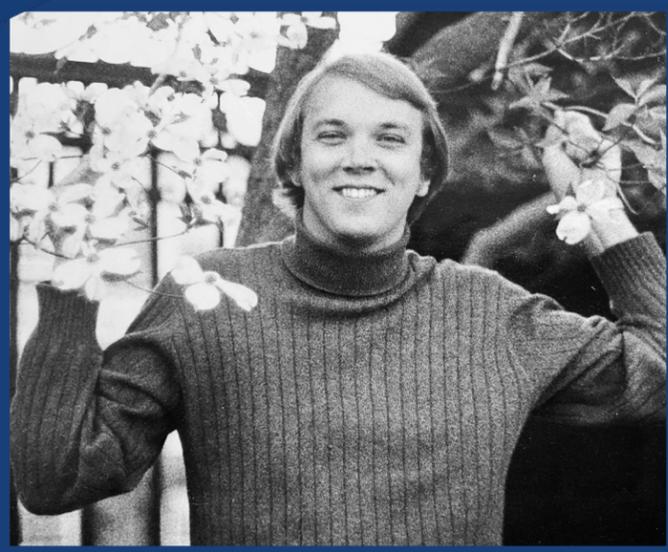
The collaboration on *Just in Time* was extraordinary. Having conceived and produced the evening at 92NY's Lyrics & Lyricists program that started it all, I was thrilled to see how it was expanded, deepened, and made into a bona fide Broadway musical. The tone was set early on—actually as early as the Y—with Jonathan Groff and Alex Timbers. Ideas were welcomed, and the best idea won. The cast was amazing. And of course, I was thrilled to see Christine with the rest of the company. Not content with kicking high and singing back-up, the Sirens became an integral part of the storytelling, making cameos as reporters and other characters who appear and disappear. Hence the eighteen costumes!

As Christine said, "Over ten years later, Kurt Weill's legacy still finds a way into this dancer's life. The gift of the Lenya Competition continues to give."

TOP: Christine Cornish at the 2015 Lenya Finals
CENTER: Cornish and Jonathan Groff in *Just in Time*
CENTER PHOTO: Ted Chapin



LUX ET VERITAS



Discovering Weill at Yale

Kim H. Kowalke

My six years pursuing a Ph.D. in music history at Yale from 1971 to 1977 coincided with the Yale Repertory Theatre's remarkable focus on several all-but-unknown works of Weill and Brecht. With new English translations by dramaturg Michael Feingold, a double bill of *The Seven Deadly Sins* and the American premiere of *Mahagonny Songspiel* launched the series in May 1971. It was so successful that "Two by Brecht and Weill" returned the following January. I remember it well. I was walking past the Rep's converted church on Chapel Street when I heard music like none I'd experienced before. I slipped into the rehearsal and sat in the back row, gobsmacked at this revelation. I never missed another Weill evening in New Haven. All were mounted in association with the Yale School of Music, utilizing Weill's original orchestrations and graduate student instrumentalists.

Later in the 1971-72 season, there was yet another American premiere, Feingold's adaptation of *Happy End* directed by Michael Posnick. Subtitled a "melodrama with songs," the farcical romp featured Alvin Epstein as Dr. Nakamura, Elizabeth Parrish as "The Fly," and Stephen Joyce as Bill Cracker. The songs were irresistible, the staging hilariously fast-paced. In Bill's Beer Hall the Gang danced with tall potted plants during the "Bilbao-Song," and "it was fantastic!" indeed.

Although the next season lacked a Weill/Brecht stage work, Martha Schlamme and Alvin Epstein (who had directed the *Sins*) brought their "Kurt Weill Cabaret" to Yale's own *Keller*. With the amazing Steven Blier (still an undergraduate) at the keyboard, the evening was a master class in idiomatic performance of a wide range of Weill's songs in three languages. I still remember their bows with delight—a real *tour de force*. Each sang a stanza of "Mack the Knife" before rotating onto the piano bench seamlessly to accompany the other.

All of this, in retrospect, was leading up to the 1974 staging (in the larger University Theater) of Feingold's new translation of *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* with Broadway star Gilbert Price as Jimmy, my future mother-in-law Grace Keagy as Begbick, and School of Music MMA soprano Stephanie Cotsirilos as Jenny (who had already played Anna I, Jessie, and Lilian). Epstein again directed, and Otto-Werner Mueller conducted 47 rotating members of Yale's Philharmonia. Sigourney Weaver, one of the "girls of Mahagonny," made a spectacular entrance reclining provocatively on an immense sofa carried by six men of Mahagonny. Students in the Drama School at the time are now almost a Who's Who of theater and film. While still students, Weaver and Chris Durang wrote and performed the "Lusitania Songspiel," a Weill/Brecht parody which eventually made it onto *Saturday Night Live*. Henry Winkler, a recent graduate (not yet "the Fonz"), had a small role in all but one of the *Sins*. Lenya had been making the trek up to New Haven for each new Weill event, but she was very present—and pleased—at this *Mahagonny*.

Audience response and national critical attention to the *Mahagonny* run prompted a revival of *Happy End* in 1975, with virtually the same cast of Rep players, except for Charles Levin as Bill and Meryl Streep as a "member of the Fold." The production was even better this time around, with Gary Fagin conducting. On closing weekend, Cotsirilos came down with the flu, and understudy Streep stepped in without a run-through. She had already made her mark in the Drama School, and word spread like wildfire. She knocked it out of the park and played Lilian for the last three performances of the run.

Fast forward two years to March 1977, when Michael Harvey produced *Happy End* at the Chelsea Theater Center in Brooklyn, hoping to tread the same path from there to Broadway that Harold Prince's *Candide* had three years earlier.

Michael Posnick directed, but little else from Yale transferred. Shirley Knight played Lilian opposite Christopher Lloyd's Bill; Grayson Hall buzzed in as *The Fly*. Previews lasted more than two months with interruptions caused by one misstep after another. In early April Posnick was replaced by Robert Kalin, and Shirley Knight bowed out, unable to cope with the vocal demands of Lilian. When her stint in *The Cherry Orchard* at Lincoln Center Theater closed, Streep took over the role with just three days' rehearsal.

Then right before the long-delayed "press night" on 26 April, Lloyd (who had played opposite Streep at Yale in

Students in the Drama School at the time are now a Who's Who of theatre and film.

Midsummer Night's Dream) severely injured ligaments in his right leg, and Bob Gunton had to take over. The production closed in Brooklyn on the last day of April, transferred to the Martin Beck Theatre, and opened without previews a week later. After opening night, Gunton came down with measles, and Lloyd hobbled back as Bill on crutches. He decided to keep them for the rest of the run. Clive Barnes deemed Streep "a knockout: She sings and acts with uttermost sweetness and enormous style." She was nominated for a Drama Desk award, and the production earned Tony nominations for best book, best score, and best new musical.

During that two-month run on Broadway, I celebrated my own happy end to six years at Yale. A Ph.D. in hand, a professorship starting in September at Occidental College in Los Angeles, a fiancée, and a lifelong fascination, if not obsession, with the music of Kurt Weill. Who could ask for anything more?

Well, how about an even bigger Weill revival in New York City? In fact, it had been underway since May 1976 when Richard Foreman's production of *The Threepenny Opera* opened at the Vivian Beaumont Theater, ran for 307 performances, and garnered five Tony nominations. During its run, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts right next door mounted "Weill-Lenya," a major exhibition that lasted four months, closing a few days after *Happy End* previews had begun at the Chelsea. A new production of *Street Scene* that opened at New York City Opera in October 1978 was televised a year later on "Live from Lincoln Center."

Two weeks after that telecast, the Metropolitan mounted *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, Weill's long overdue debut in that house. The performance again was seen nationally on "Live from Lincoln Center." During an intermission interview, Lenya proclaimed Teresa Stratas her "dream Jenny" and entrusted the soprano with a trove of unpublished songs, which she sang at the Whitney Museum in January. In March 1980 New York City Opera premiered *Silverlake* (based on *Der Silbersee*) conducted by Julius Rudel, directed by Hal Prince, and starring Joel Grey.

By then my dissertation, *Kurt Weill in Europe*, had been published, and Nonesuch invited me to write the liner notes for recordings of both *Silverlake* and Stratas's *The Unknown Kurt Weill*. That title could no longer describe Weill's European stage works. A renaissance that had started a decade earlier at Yale was now virtually ubiquitous. European Weill would be a stranger to the American theater no more.



TOP LEFT: (back row) Martha Leipsic, Sigourney Weaver, Carmen de Lavallade (front row) Kate McGregor-Stewart, Stephanie Cotsirilos, in *Mahagonny*, 1974; Meryl Streep & Christopher Lloyd, *Happy End* on Broadway, 1977; Henry Winkler, Yale Rep, 1972; Grayson Hall as *The Fly* with her gang in *Happy End*, 1977. BOTTOM LEFT: Kurt Kasznar, Jeremy Geidt, Grace Keagy in *Mahagonny*, 1974; Stephanie Cotsirilos, Lotte Lenya, Gilbert Price, Alvin Epstein, *Mahagonny* cast party, 1974; ABOVE: *Mahagonny* finale, 1974.

ABOVE: Kowalke at Yale, 1974

ABOVE RIGHT: Yale Rep's converted church

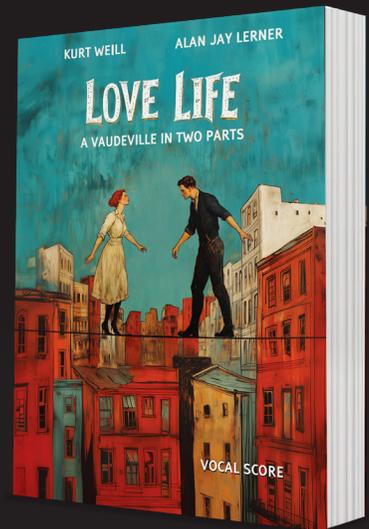
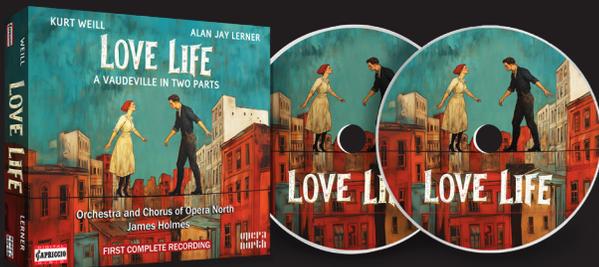
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