SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1285

MUSIK IN DER WEIMAR REPUBLIK

Brecht Die Dreigroschenoper Weill

There is an interesting entry for Thursday, 27th September 1928 in Count Harry Kessler's *Diary of a Cosmopolitan*, "In the evening saw Brecht's *Dreigroschenoper*, music by Weill. A fascinating production, with rudimentary staging in the Piscator style. Weill's music is catchy and expressive and the players (Harald Paulsen, Rosa Valetti, and so on) are excellent. It is the show of the season, always sold out: 'You must see it!'".

Perhaps this diary note by an acute observer of the Berlin scene should be framed between two further references. In *Before the Deluge*, published in 1972, Otto Friedrich (an equally keen observer, he also wrote the introduction to the Kessler volume) commented laconically how "the opening night was a legendary triumph, and of every ten Berliners alive today, at least three claim to have been in the cheering audience". Kessler's editor comments that the work made Brecht's name, and adds that "some of the tunes by Kurt Weill are still sung".

During the last part of the twentieth century, there was a growing interest in 'rediscovering' apparently neglected, or forgotten, music. Particular attention has been given to the genre attacked by the Nazis as "Entartete Musik" (degenerate music) of which the compositions of Weill were chosen as prime examples. In January 2000 the BBC celebrated the centenary of Weill's birth and the fiftieth anniversary of his death by sponsoring a festival at the Barbican focusing on his less familiar works. Popular and media reception was rapturous. The *Daily Telegraph* wrote of the "sublime and memorable music", whilst the *Financial Times* was in no doubt that this was the "liveliest and most enlightening mini-festival in years", and went on to ask "who could have expected such good, appreciative houses for a far-out pair of one act German operas from the mid-1920s?".

There has, of course, been a growing realization that in the world of the arts something extraordinary happened during the few brief years of the Weimar Republic. The explosion of talent was perhaps without parallel. In sheer numbers the proliferation of musical and theatrical events must have far exceeded that of any other city anywhere in the world, and there was a considerable concentration on contemporary works. This was the world which produced Kurt Weill. He was a classical musician, amongst his teachers were Humperdinck and Busoni, but his music was always contemporary. He composed for the world around him; and that was as true for his later Broadway works as for his formative years in Berlin. Any notion that ultimately he somehow 'prostituted his talent' in his later work is absurd. The musical genre of *Lady in the Dark* and *One Touch of Venus* may be in stark contrast to that of twentieth century works by Richard Strauss or Benjamin Britten. However, although the composer himself tended to use the term 'musical theatre', they are still part of the world of opera, a fact recognized in the three volume *Opera on Record* edited by Alan Blyth. The chapter on Weill by Rodney Milnes is the very last in the trilogy. In it Rodney Milnes demolishes the notion that there are two Weills "there is only one and his genius is beyond dispute". Such a superlative goes someway beyond Weill's more musicological sentiment, "I have never acknowledged the

difference between serious music and popular music – there is only good music and bad music". [Also attributed to Fritz Kreisler and to Henry Wood, perhaps a popular comment of the era. Ed.]

Die Dreigroschenoper was the first full collaboration between Kurt Weill and the Marxist playwright Berthold Brecht. They had already produced *Mahagonny*, a Songspiel which was the fore-runner of a full length opera, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*. The text for *Die Dreigroschenoper* was drawn from Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. Like its predecessor the new work was a sharp satire aimed at the ruling classes in the context of Weimar Germany, the bourgeoisie. There is no way in which such a work could ever be considered as 'unpolitical'; its very existence is a proof that the worlds of art and politics can and do mix. In the context of the latter half of the Weimar republic that mix and the collaboration between the Marxist writer and the Jewish composer were explosive. Much of the immediate reaction to the première on 31st August is quoted in Jurgen Schebera's *Kurt Weill: an illustrated life*. Against conservative comments that the work was "a political horror ballad" amounting to "literary necrophilia", the music critic Hans Stuckenschmidt claimed that the new work had given a fresh infusion to both opera and operetta, introducing "an emerging art form of immeasurable importance and potential". Such a view was hardly likely to be shared by the National Socialist press for which the work was "an especially noxious cesspool".

Possibly such contrasting opinions helped secure a huge success for *Die Dreigroschenoper*. In any event Berlin remained throughout the 1920s a strongly cosmopolitan city in which the Social Democrats were a leading political force. As already mentioned there was a vibrant theatrical, musical and operatic life.

Opera was performed on a regular basis in three houses: the Staatsoper, the Stadtoper and Klemperer's Krolloper. However, the new Brecht-Weill work was first given not by one of these, but at the Theater am Schiffbauerdam and proceeded to run with changing casts for the entire season, to, according to Schebera, consistently sold out houses. He makes the astonishing claim that within a year it had been performed some 4,000 times at no less than fifty theatres. Whilst no complete documentation is available, we do know from Loewenberg's *Annals of the Opera* that it reached Prague and Vienna within a few months and was rapidly translated into Polish, Dutch, Danish, Russian, Hungarian, French and English. The present Compact Disc suggests that it was also performed in Hebrew. By 1933 Weill's publishers, Universal Editions had licensed more than 130 productions worldwide.

The most popular songs were extensively printed and distributed. Otto Klemperer immediately commissioned Weill to provide him with an orchestral suite of music from the opera, and the immensely popular Marek Weber was one of many band-leaders to play arrangements. The record industry, too, a relatively new phenomenon, certainly played a significant part in disseminating the work. Most of the early recordings were made in Germany and must have originally sold in large numbers; their relative rarity today largely reflects the impact of National Socialism. For the Nazis Kurt Weill represented the very essence of "Entartete Musik". Weill himself escaped to France from where he emigrated to the United States of America. There he composed a further group of important works and there both *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* have long since been recognized as masterpieces.

The New Order rapidly extinguished the most creative aspects of musical activity which had characterized the Weimar Republic. In this context it should be noted that the

aesthetic, if not the political, controversy certainly travelled beyond Germany's frontiers. A marvellous press pack produced by the BBC for the festival at the Barbican offers some choice quotations. It was the BBC which was responsible for the very first performance in England. This was as late as February 1935. The August *Musical Times* opined, in somewhat xenophobic tones, that it was "a crude and painful foreign perversion (of Gay's *Beggar's Opera*) ". Ernest Newman, never one to mince words, did not know which was feebler, the libretto or the music, "perhaps the latter which has the worst faults of more than one bad style and the qualities of not a single good one, even at second hand". Even in 1950 a critic in *The Times* described Weill's music as "positively revolting" and reflecting "the worst features of post-armistice, pre-Hitler Germany". The BBC, which has played an enormous role in Britain at least in popularizing Weill's music, also offers in the pack a nice piece of retrospective self-judgement. Back in 1953 it was proposed to use a transmission by Radio Monte-Carlo of *Die Dreigroschenoper*. The inevitable, happily anonymous official, was around to object, "this work expresses the very essence of the most decadent period in all European culture during this century - a period which we would do well to forget. I have to admit that I regard Weill as a completely bogus composer and have come to the conclusion that none of his scores are worth the trouble of reviving".

Happily such sentiments had by then virtually run their course. In the mid-1950s no less than 2,611 consecutive performances of *Die Dreigroschenoper* were given at the Theatre de Lys in New York. At about the same time it finally received a full British stage première. This was followed in 1963 by Sadler's Wells' superb production of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*. Interestingly, also about this time, came the veritable explosion of interest in the works of Mahler. Today, nearly forty years since then, and more than seventy years since the work was first performed, Weill's compositions have an assured place in the repertoire; his works are extensively performed and received with similar acclaim to that characterizing his Weimar days. There has been also a gradual realization that there were not two Kurt Weills; clear linkages, if not quite seamless, are discernable between the Berlin works, particularly those written in collaboration with Berthold Brecht, and the later compositions for New York's musical theatre. Such a revival of interest is sufficient justification to re-issue a collection of some of the very earliest recordings from *Die Dreigroschenoper*.

In this album are performances characteristic of the time when the work was sweeping across first Germany and then much of the rest of the musical world. I have chosen the word 'characteristic' deliberately. We like to think of early performances as especially 'authentic', but we need to remember both Weill's own use of the term 'musical theatre' and the fact that the progenitor of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, Gay's *The Beggars Opera*, was a ballad opera.

Ballads may be traditional, but they are also subject to improvisation, music is moved around and characters appropriate songs from others. This process is particularly evident with the early filmed versions. The earliest recordings of *Die Dreigroschenoper* also demonstrate this tendency; though the order in the four disc Telefunken set was almost certainly influenced by the desire to include as much as possible on eight ten-inch sides. This, the longest series of excerpts, has obvious links with the première. It is conducted by Theo Mackeben. Mackeben himself, the Lewis Ruth band, Kurt Gerron, Erich Ponto and Lotte Lenya were all in the first performances.

At the première Lotte Lenya sang the relatively small role of Jenny. Ironically her name was omitted from the programme as printed and her participation required an insert;

seemingly a genuine mistake and not linked to any hidden agenda.

Lenya and Weill were actually married twice. Her voice, more than any other, carried Weill's songs to the world. Her interpretations may be described as authentic as they were so often the first performances, and because of her relationship with the composer, but it is worth recognizing that there are other ways of singing Weill. Lenya's characteristic snarl suggests correctly that she was never trained as a singer, and we now know that it is possible to 'sing' Weill in a more classical manner. Lenya's pre-eminence on these records is emphasized by her expropriation of significant chunks of music sung by other characters.

Carola Neher offers another link to the early performances. She should have been the first Polly, but had to be replaced when she left to join her dying husband in Switzerland. The two items in French by Florelle are also of special interest. The Pabst film exists in German and in French versions with different casts. Florelle is Polly in the latter and her records were made at the same time as the film. The Hebrew and Danish records are interesting, the extent of their circulation is unclear. Lea Deganith and Gerda Madsen were recorded in London and Copenhagen respectively, but the copies used here were both manufactured by H.M.V. at Hayes.

The story can be told briefly. Polly Peachum has secretly married Macheath, a notorious gangland leader. Police chief Brown, he and Macheath have known each other since their army days, is a guest at the wedding. Polly's father, who, behind a façade of bourgeois respectability organizes prostitution and robbery throughout London, wants his daughter returned and Macheath arrested. This is facilitated when Macheath is betrayed by the whore Jenny. Macheath has also seduced Brown's daughter, Lucy, and she helps him to escape. On the day of the Queen's coronation Peachum threatens disruption by his beggars unless the criminal is re-arrested. Macheath is re-arrested. His friends are loathe to put up sufficient to bribe the gaoler, but in the end Macheath escapes the death sentence through a royal pardon to mark the coronation.

With such a story, and the bold harmonic lines of Weill's new music, it is hardly surprising that the early performances caused such controversy.

Stanley Henig

[The excerpts in the Telefunken set are reproduced here in the order of a 1958 performance which included Lotte Lenya. - Editor]

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