

## Degenerate Composer Number One

Kurt Weill's musical theatre - with its sharp political satire and black humour - made him a prime target for Nazi censorship. Jessica Duchen assesses the work of a composer who started out writing symphonies and ended up on Broadway

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You know Kurt Weill. Almost everyone knows Kurt Weill, even if they don't think they do: he wrote September Song and Mack the Knife. But with Weill's centenary on March 2 2000 comes the perfect opportunity, in celebratory events throughout the season, to discover the real Weill beyond those few popular tunes - for Weill is probably the only German musical genius who started out writing atonal symphonies and ended up on Broadway.

Weill's life and works sum up many of the harsh effects that his turbulent times brought to bear on music. Throughout this century, fine composers have been ostracised, exiled or murdered because they were born in the wrong place at the wrong time; in addition, they have been critically condemned for writing melodies, which became seriously unfashionable in the wake of the revolt against 19th-century romanticism.

These factors are the principal reasons why Weill was banished to the margins of what was perceived as mainstream 20th-century music; critics such as the influential Theodor Adorno dismissed his American achievements, saying that Weill had sold out to commercialism, ignoring the fact that he was only there because he had been forced to flee Nazi Germany. They also ignored the sterling quality of much of his Broadway music, which dared, fatally, to be popular.

The title of the South Bank Centre's Weill festival - Kurt Weill: From Time to Time - is apt on several levels. Weill himself moved from era to era with, if not exactly ease, then at least a virtuoso adaptability. For the listener, according to the festival's co-director, the Viennese composer, conductor and "chansonnier" HK Gruber, Weill is a composer who should be rediscovered "from time to time" as a force that refreshes the spirit of communicative music.

Gruber, who co-directs the SBC's festival with the eminent Weill scholar David Drew, is himself quite a Weillesque blend of versatility and irreverence. He has always found Weill an inspiration. "When I was about 20, at the beginning of the 60s, I discovered that this man who wrote Mack the Knife composed something more than that," Gruber recounts. "I was so fascinated that there was a composer who spoke a musical language which seemed to be simple but was in fact very complex. Weill's songs may sound simple, but there is a profound and very personal complexity in his use of harmony, and especially in the richness of the inner voices. My problem as a young composer was the complicated and not very communicative modern music of these days - Darmstadt, Donaueschingen, and 'serial' technique - which did not very much belong to me. I was looking for some old masters who had a similar problem. And I found Weill."

Weill was born in Dessau, where his father was a cantor in the synagogue. He went on to study with Ferruccio Busoni, and his early works, written in the mainstream of European symphonic music of the time - free atonality - saw him rapidly acclaimed as one of the leading young German composers of his day. His first opera, *Der Protagonist*, firmly established his position as a powerful composer of musical drama. But by this time, 1926, he had settled in Berlin, where he soon came into contact with some very different influences. Times were changing.

"The Weimar Republic developed democracy for the first time in Germany," Gruber says. "But in this short time - before the next dictator came along - it was very interesting to see how this brand new group, the Marxists, the Socialists, influenced the arts: the culture immediately was naughty and fresh and inventive. They developed also a very new style in theatre and a new type of singer-actor." For such singer-actors, an almost pictorial projection of the text takes pride of place, says Gruber, in contrast to traditional bel canto beauty of sound, and this is the inspiration for his own "chansonnier" style. "In 1963, I heard Mahagonny for the first time and I was fascinated by the pronunciation of singers like Lotte Lenya: the consonants exploded like bombs, the rolling 'rrr' sliced each word like a grasscutter and the vowels were very bright."

Weill's collaborations during this era with the writer Bertolt Brecht - including *Der Dreigroschenoper* (The Threepenny Opera) and *Der Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny), now Weill's most celebrated works - created a musical theatre that combined music and drama with the black humour of sharp social and political satire in a unique way.

Passionate controversy and near-rioting instantly flared up around the Brecht-Weill works. The Mahagonny Songspiel (the shorter forerunner of the full-length opera) was premiered at the Baden-Baden Festival in 1927, and Weill's wife, Lotte Lenya, who sang one of the leading roles, remembered: "Mahagonny began with a real, an unmistakable tune. The demonstration began as we were singing the last song, and waving placards... with the whole audience on its feet cheering and booing and whistling. Brecht had thoughtfully provided us with whistles of our own, so we stood there defiantly whistling back."

With the rise of the Nazis, times changed again. Weill was a prime target for the Nazis' artistic censorship: not only was he Jewish, but he was a socialist who worked with the radically Marxist Brecht. Mahagonny featured an anti-capitalist plot in which a citizen is put to death for being unable to pay his bills.

"Mahagonny was one of the strongest reasons the Nazis were against Weill," relates Gruber. "In 1934 in Dusseldorf, at the Nazis' exhibition of *Entartete Musik* [degenerate music], Weill was Degenerate Composer Number One. At this exhibition, the Nazis played shellac recordings; thousands of people came each day to listen a last time to *Der Dreigroschenoper*. The Nazis thought their exhibition was a success because so many people were coming - but people knew this would be their last chance to hear this music. Weill soon had to escape to Paris overnight, without a penny in his pocket."

From Paris, Weill and Lenya made their way in 1935 to New York, where Weill was to conduct the premiere of his "dramatic oratorio" on a text by Franz Werfel, *The Eternal Road*, inspired by the Jewish music of his childhood and the fate of so many of his fellow Jews in Europe. Settled in America permanently, Weill went on to write a number of Broadway musicals, in which frothier entertainment necessarily replaced the biting satire of Brecht. These works, such as *Knickerbocker Holiday*, *One Touch of Venus* and *Lady in the Dark*, have always been widely judged as inferior to *Der Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny*, even though (or perhaps because) Paramount Pictures broke financial records by paying \$300,000 for the film rights to *Lady in the Dark*.

Yet this reputation owes more to the plots than the quality of the music - some of Weill's Broadway songs have become classics. Few admirers would condemn *September Song* to oblivion just because its words are not by Brecht. And the musical style is not as distant from his German songs as one might think. "When he used the so-called American style, he took it like a foreign language and spoke it with a German accent," explains Gruber. "This German accent is still the 'Berlinisch' element. One should not try to Americanise this music completely."

Gruber's affinity for Weill largely concerns the former's ideals about communicative music, the motivating force of an ensemble that Gruber formed in 1968 with his fellow composer Kurt Schwertsik. The title was "MOB art and tone ART", and their intention was to reach wide new audiences with a fresh approach to free tonality, in reaction against the ever more complex works of the mainstream serialist avant-garde. The central philosophy was, iconoclastically, to reduce music to melody, rhythm and harmony - "Enough", says Gruber, with a wicked twinkle, "to get you immediately banished from the Central Committee of the Plinky-Plonky Party!"

"Music has to communicate without written explanations. It should speak for itself. In the 20s, Weill had exactly the same problem. In the German-Austrian area, composers began to forget that music should communicate. Young composers decided that using Schoenberg's 12-note serialist technique meant that they were the most modern of the moderns - although the audience was probably not so convinced. Weill had played instead with a free atonality, a little like late Busoni; then, when he met Brecht, he began to simplify his music. The collaboration with Brecht led to Der Dreigroschenoper, which is full of songs. And what would a song be without melody, rhythm and harmony? So, Weill was, in a way, the first 'MOB art and tone ART' composer!"

- The South Bank Centre festival, with performances on October 3, 4, 10 and 14 and March 2 and 29, brings together the whole range of Weill's output. Highlights include Der Dreigroschenoper with a cast of German cabaret singers conducted by Gruber on October 10.
- There's a feast of Weill at the Barbican on January 15 and 16, when the BBC Symphony Orchestra devotes an intensive festival to the centenary, with music ranging from the Second Symphony and Der Protagonist to a late-night cabaret concert by Ute Lemper.
- For further information on Weill, visit [www.kwf.org](http://www.kwf.org).
- SBC box office: 0171 960 4242
- Barbican box office: 0171 638 8891.