

Kurt Weill on Bertolt Brecht (1927)

Abstract

Kurt Weill (1900-1950) grew up in a bourgeois Jewish family and received an elite education at the Berliner Hochschule für Musik and the Preußische Akademie der Künste. Weill's music drew on eclectic influences, but especially the idioms of American jazz and modernist composers like Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg. His collaboration with writer Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) made a lasting impact on the music and popular culture of the Weimar Republic. The two artists met in 1927 when Weill raved about Brecht's radio piece *Mann ist Mann*. They began working together until political differences split them apart in 1930. Their first collaboration, commissioned by the German Chamber Music Festival in Baden-Baden, was a sensation when it premiered on July 17, 1927. This song cycle, *Mahagonny*, took place in a fictional American city full of petty criminals and corrupt police. The creators anticipated scandal, and they got it: Brecht provided the performers with whistles to retaliate against the audience's booing. Weill and Brecht eventually reworked the cycle into a full opera titled *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930). Though it was never as popular as their masterwork, *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), *Mahagonny* dealt with similar themes. Weill's publisher at the Viennese press Universal Edition, Emil Hertzka (1869-1932), found Lotte Lenya's performance so enchanting that he sent her a check for a Baltic holiday. But after the polarized response at Baden-Baden, Hertzka was concerned that a full-length version of *Mahagonny* would be "musically effective" but that Brecht's text would be "simply unperformable in a large number of cities." Weill's response champions his collaboration with Brecht that so exemplified the energy, style, and democratizing impulses of Weimar culture.

Source

The reason I am drawn to Brecht is, first of all, the strong interaction of my music with his poetry, which surprised all those in Baden-Baden who were competent to judge. But further I am convinced that the close collaboration of two equally productive individuals can lead to something fundamentally new. There can certainly be no doubt that at present a completely new form of stage work is evolving, one that is directed to a different and much larger audience and whose appeal will be unusually broad. This movement, whose strongest force in the spoken drama is Brecht, hasn't had any effect upon opera to date (except in *Mahagonny*), although music is one of its most essential elements. In long discussions with Brecht I have become convinced that his idea of an operatic text largely coincides with my own. The piece we are going to create won't exploit topical themes, which will be dated in a year, but rather will reflect the true tenor of our times. For that reason it will have an impact far beyond its own age. The task is to create the new genre which gives appropriate expression to the completely transformed manifestation of life in our time. You were able to observe in Baden-Baden that this art, in spite of its novelty, can have a sensational effect.

Source: Jürgen Schebera, *Kurt Weill, an Illustrated Life*, translated by Caroline Murphy. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, pp. 101-02.

Source of original German text: Nils Grosch, *Kurt Weill. Briefwechsel mit der Universal Edition*. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2002, no. 229, pp. 78-79.

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