

MOST MELODIOUS TEARS

VIRGIL THOMSON

KURT WEILL is a new model of German composer. There is no flavor of scholasticism or officialdom about him. His training, or at least his early experience, is that of a writer of sad popular songs, mostly about whores and gangsters, the kind of thing that the French call *chansons réalistes*. The *Dreigroschenoper* is full of these, the most current one in Paris night-club repertory being *La Fiancée du Pirate*.

The elaboration of such matter into dramatic pieces of some pretension has been aided by two perfect collaborators, a poet named Bert Brecht, his librettist, and his wife Lotte Lenja, a singer, or rather a diseuse of most extraordinary personality. The formula for these works is always the same. There is a story about simple, very simple people. There are songs for the chief actors, choral passages of dramatic or moral comment and a few instrumental passages. There are also costumes and a kind of elementary *mise-en-scène*. They are little morality-plays.

The accompaniments are meant to imitate a not-too-competent jazz-band. They are well-scored. The songs have a perfection of prosody that is unequaled by any European composer. Without degenerating into mere *sprechstimme*, keeping at all times the formal contour of a popular song, there is a union of words and tune that, once made, is indissoluble. No one who has heard *Mahogonny* can recall either element of *O Moon of Alabama* without recalling something of the other. The choral parts are less striking in that work, but the children's chorus *Er hat Ja Gesagt* from *Der Jasager* is memorable. Madame Lenja has a tiny voice, seemingly untrained, with no resonance, no placing and no power. She sings or rather croons, with an impeccable diction that reaches to the farthest corner of any hall and with

an intensity of dramatization and a sincerity of will that are very moving. She is, moreover, beautiful in a new way, a way that nobody has vulgarized so far, and her simple costumes are admirable. It will not be long, I imagine, before some movie-gang gets hold of her and stuffs her down our throats like Garbo.

The program of the Sérénade concert in London, while neglecting to print the names of the interpreters, went to the trouble of explaining to the supposedly ignorant English that the music of Kurt Weill had "something of Mozart and the better moments of Cole Porter." This means nothing, of course. It is just a citing of impressive names to warn the listener that he is about to be impressed by Exhibit A. He usually is and sometimes gets mad. The music has a heaviness that is not far from real power and a melodic line that, seemingly cheap and tawdry, doesn't let itself be easily forgotten. Most of all, in the subject matter of the poetry, in the lay of the tunes, in the monotony of the accompaniments, is an authentic flavor of the ghetto which is recognizable by anybody as a thing depicted and which is completely touching to anyone who has ever had any real contact with the ghetto.



Kurt Weill has done for Berlin what Charpentier did for Paris. He has dramatized its midinettes and their family life. He has thrown a certain aspect of it sharply against the sky. He has touched hearts. He has almost created style. One can be indifferent to the subject-matter. One cannot say that the work is non-existent or entirely low. Its authenticity, plus the fact that it is all very easy to understand, is why it is so eagerly received by the Paris fashionables ever alert for a new kind of gutter.

There is no use pretending that it is profoundly new or in any way recondite. Weill's work is far more commonplace than Satie's, but his esthetic is the esthetic of *Mercur*e. Such a homage, and from Germany of all places, is of course irresistible to the French.

The stories of his little cantatas are very moral. The *Yes-Sayer* is a little boy whose mother is about to die for lack of certain medicines. When the doctor asks for volunteers to cross a dan-



THE SEVEN CARDINAL SINS BY KURT WEILL

Design by CASPAR NEHER

Presented in Paris last
Spring by the Ballets 1933

gerous mountain pass in the snow and get the medicine, the little boy says yes; and later when he gets sick and risks causing the loss of the entire expedition by having to be carried, he again does his duty by jumping over a cliff.

Les Sept Péchés Capitaux (in English, *Anna-Anna*) is about a young girl who leaves home to make money for her aging parents. She has two spirits in her, one lazy and easy-going, the other devoted to the job she has to do, which is building a little house in Louisiana by the Mississippi fluss for said parents. Naturally, the more dutiful spirit manages to egg her on through everything and get money sent home periodically as she commits with profit most of the allegedly deadly sins. Gluttony only is denied her, as I remember, because it spoils her figure; and true-lust is discouraged because an *amant de coeur* costs money. The little house in one front corner of the stage gets bigger with each check, and the male quartet that represents the family ceases eventually to complain about her laziness and appears finally before the completed cottage dressed as Southern mammies to welcome home the tired but noble prostitute. This was presented at the Ballets 1933, Lotte Lenja singing the part of the family spirit in Anna and Tilly Losch dancing the adventures of the real one. The spectacle is heavy and monotonous. The relentless length to which that poor girl is dragged through sin after sin is, well the best one can say is that it is very German. The piece has some style, just the same. The accompaniment is not uninteresting, in spite of its weight. The purely instrumental portions, as is often true of a composer with a good gift for vocal writing, are less interesting.

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Mahogonny is pathos about the street-life of pre-Hitler Berlin, the Berlin of night-clubs, of low bars, of universal destitution, of universal prostitution. Fragile and underfed youth with no mother to guide it imagines, from having heard it sung about, that somewhere in Alabama is a *pays de cockaigne* called *Mahogonny* where everything is jake, so to speak. They all go looking for it. The little girl describes her life and how she learned very early to ask gentlemen, "Wünschen Sie mich mit Wäsche oder ohne Wäsche?" But even in Alabama they find no

promised land. There is a very pretty song in English to these words:

“O moon of Alabama
I now must say goodby,
There is no dear old mama
And I know the reason why.”

It is all very unsuitable to the taste of these urchins. “Here is no whiskey-bar, goddam. Here is no telephone.” “I must get whiskey, must get whiskey or I die,” sings Lenja.

This is tender and touching and fortunately Lotte Lenja did her own miming at the *Sérénade*, so that we were spared the contortions of Tilly Losch, who beside Lenja’s sweet voice and fragile beauty is everything one can imagine of competent vulgarity. *Mahogonny* is fresher than *Anna-Anna*. The music more inspired or at least more *trouvé*, the whole less made-to-order.

A great deal of the press was taken in by the apparent cynicism of Anna and mistook the poem for a sort of communism-to-amuse-the-rich. This is quite wrong. It is a story of filial devotion like *Der Jasager*. The music has all the weight and authority of a sermon. There is nowhere any flippancy or trifling. It is just plain sad all the way through. So is *Mahogonny*.

Weill is not a Great Composer any more than Charpentier is. He has a warm heart and a first-class prosodic gift. The rest is moving enough, perhaps too moving. It smells of Hollywood. It is hokum like *Louise*, sincere hokum. If it really touches you, you go all to pieces inside. If not, it is still something anyway, though not so much.

The line between hokum and real stuff is far from sharp. Many a serious career has been made in the no man’s land that lies between the two, provided there was talent and a sincere passion about something or other, like Byron with his loves or Toulouse-Lautrec and his night-life. Let him who has never wept at the movies throw the first stone at Weill’s tearful but elegant ditties about the Berlin ghetto.