Books

Handbuch des Musicals: Die wichtigsten Titel von A bis Z

Thomas Siedhoff

Mainz: Schott, 2007, 731 pp.
ISBN: 978-3-7957-0154-3

The musicals craze that Germany experienced in the 1990s belongs to the past. The sense of a "gold rush" has subsided, and a phase of consolidation appears to have set in. Now that audiences are more familiar with the genre, it seems to be well on the way to taking its rightful place in the world of musical theater. By the same token, musicology and theater departments have begun to get past their ignorance and condescension in favor of an unbiased view and increased scholarly activity. Thomas Siedhoff, who has been dealing with the subject for many years both as academic and practitioner (dramaturg), has published a sizeable handbook. It is addressed less to the aficionado than to university students or dramaturgs who are looking for a handy source of information.

Siedhoff adheres to two principles: he collects and relays as much information as possible, and he selects those musicals whose qualities transcend the show's initial popularity. His selection reveals both depth of knowledge and assured judgment. In addition to the American repertoire from *The Black Crook* (1866) to *Spamalot* (2005) he also includes a number of French, Italian, and Russian titles. The volume's foreword (set in minuscule type, alas) contains a short introduction to the German musical. Discussions of individual German shows, including historical ones, in the volume's main body supplement this section. For Weill, entries can be found not only for his American works but also for *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Happy End*.

Not entirely convincing is Siedhoff's decision to place three more general sections within his alphabetically arranged compilation. The "Anthologies" section describes a number of jukebox musicals (e.g., *Ain't Misbehavin'*). "Operetta adaptations" contains only three titles. Here, at least *The Mikado* should have found its way into the book—a work that saw not just one but several adaptations (most notably the *Hot Mikado* with an all-black cast). And it would have been nice if Siedhoff had managed, perhaps using *The Merry Widow* as an example, to highlight the influence of European operetta on American musical theater, as evinced by numerous American adaptations in the early twentieth century. Siedhoff devotes his third interpolated section to the revue, where he provides an overview of German, British, American, and French productions that he also discusses in brief. In this he breaks new ground, for previous German-language guides to the musical have hardly touched on revues.

Siedhoff's entries for individual shows provide a wealth of detail. Not only do we get information about the authors, original cast, literary models, American and European premieres, and musical numbers, but Siedhoff's practical experience leads him to list requirements for casting and orchestral forces. Furthermore, he provides information about performance materials, editions, recordings, and secondary literature. In addition to a detailed synopsis, Siedhoff adds a fact-laden "commentary," where he delivers more information about the piece, its peculiarities, cultural position, and impact. Here, he likes to go beyond the role of objective chronicler and takes the opportunity to express his personal views. An extensive appendix lists chronologically every title covered in the alphabetical entries and categorizes them according to themes and subjects; it also offers a section on dance in musicals, a glossary of the most important terms, and groups the musicals—somewhat arbitrarily—according to genre.

The abundance if not surfeit of information that Siedhoff includes in his handbook costs him when it comes to precision. A single-author encyclopedic work leads almost inevitably to errors and blunders. Merely thumbing through the volume gives one the impression that a thorough editing job would have improved the book a good deal, by tightening and refining its hastily written prose or correcting minor errors and inaccuracies. Random cases in point: "Berlin's satire *Of Thee I Sing*" (p. 324) was composed by Gershwin, of course (and is so identified in the full entry on p. 409); the director of the film musical *Shall We Dance* (1937) was not Stanley Donen but Mark Sandrich (p. 300); the premiere of *Street Scene* was directed not by Rouben Mamoulian but by Charles Friedman (p. 581); the German translation, "Verrücktes Mädchen," for *Girl Crazy* is incorrect (p. 229); the music of Philip Glass and Steve Reich cannot be called "serial" (p. 592); and the composer Adam Guettel's name undergoes a Germanified respelling, Güttel (p. 683). Finally, the index omits Kurt Weill, of all people.

In his commendable desire to convey his encyclopedic knowledge, which includes some remote areas, Siedhoff gets carried away at times. No matter how apt his observation that the song "Cellophane" from *Chicago* is a parody of Bert Williams's "Nobody," few readers will be able to make sense of this comparison. What German reader will be familiar with the melancholy black comedian from the *Ziegfeld Follies*? (If one searches the index for Bert Williams and checks the reference on p. 268, the "Williams" named on that page is neither Bert Williams nor any other Williams; the context reveals that it could only be a misprint for Thornton Wilder.) For some books, we look forward hopefully to a second revised edition. This book is certainly a candidate. For the time being, the title of a show tune expresses its current state: "It needs work."

Gisela Maria Schubert
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Books

The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century

Alex Ross

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, 624 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-374-24939-7

Is there anyone who remains unaware of Alex Ross's much reviewed and ballyhooed *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*? Surely the most widely read and acclaimed chronicle of music in this period, *The Rest Is Noise* won the 2007 National Book Critics Circle Award (it was also a finalist for the 2008 Pulitzer for General Non-Fiction) and appeared on the most influential "top ten" lists of 2007 (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Time*, *The Economist*, *Slate*, and *Newsweek*). Only an endorsement from Oprah's Book Club still eludes him.

Lest this review become Exhibit A for one of the many trends Ross traces in his book—the tendency of academics to shun art music that is also popular—let me state for the record that *The Rest Is Noise* richly deserves all the attention. While it has certainly benefited from a massive marketing campaign, the likes of which no academic press could ever hope to deploy, it lives up to the hype. It is provocative, original, entertaining, and eminently readable.

The chapter devoted to "Berlin in the Twenties" is entitled "City of Nets," in homage to *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. It is engagingly written as an overview for non-experts. Ross treats the usual suspects (Hindemith, Weill, Schoenberg, Krenek, Eisler, and Brecht), noting that "there was something bracingly un-German about this new German talent" (p. 182). He acknowledges the importance of Busoni not only for Weill but for the era, calling him "a magus-like musician who hovered over the early twentieth century like a spider in his web" (p. 187). He gamely takes on Weill's and Brecht's notions of *Gestus* (pp. 187–90) before discussing *The Threepenny Opera*, in which the two "produced 'art of the people' that the people heard and liked" (p. 190). Eisler receives more attention than usual in English-language accounts of this period, some of it in memorable turns of phrase ("the terrorist chic of Eisler's *The Measures Taken*," p. 527). Ross has clearly done his homework. For example, he quotes prominent scholar Stephen Hinton (p. 192), but this is one of innumerable instances (hundreds?) in which a direct quotation is not footnoted. Yes, the absence of citations is a concession to general readers that facilitates the narrative flow, but it may exasperate those seeking to follow up on such tidbits.

The book does not always progress in strict chronological order, a flexibility that permits Ross to track the afterlives of some of these works. In an effort to honor the importance of Lenya's American performing career for Weill's posthumous reputation, he reports that she made an indelible impression on Bob Dylan when he saw her in the revue *Brecht on Brecht* in 1962. It is clear from the song list and set description recounted in Dylan's *Chronicles*, however, that the production he saw was actually *The Threepenny Opera*. Furthermore, Dylan does not mention Lenya at all, presumably because she was no longer in the cast by the time he saw the show. Fortunately, that miscue does not negate his trenchant point about the importance of the Weill/Brecht collaboration for the young songwriter. "In the spirit of Brecht and Weill, Dylan proceeded to carve his own *Gestus*-like phrases into the minds of late-twentieth-century listeners: 'The answer is blowin' in the wind,' 'A hard rain's a-gonna fall,' 'the times they are a-changin'.' The last was a direct quotation from one of Brecht's lyrics for Hanns Eisler. The spirit of Berlin played on" (pp. 193–94). This embodies a major narrative theme of the book, which is the cross-pollination of art and popular music; in fact, in the epilogue Ross posits that "[O]ne possible destination for twenty-first-century music is a final 'great fusion': intelligent pop artists and extroverted composers speaking more or less the same language" (p. 542). Weill aficionados will note with pride that he saw this possibility early on; it is a point Ross pursues to great effect throughout.

"The City of Nets" is in Part I, which covers the period 1900–1933. The portions devoted to Mahler, Debussy, Schoenberg and Stravinsky tend to hew closely to the standard accounts of their historical positions, but the prominent role Sibelius plays in Ross's account lies far outside those narratives. In a chapter devoted entirely to the Finnish composer, Ross places the "Apparition from the Woods" in opposition to "The City of Nets." Ross argues that Sibelius, who is often said to have outlived his compositional era, actually ranks among the most influential voices of the century. He compellingly connects the dots between an extraordinary array of musicians who cite Sibelius's "antimodern modernism" (p. 176) as both important and formative. These range from Brian Ferneyhough, Peter Maxwell Davies, and John Adams to Kaija Saariaho and Morton Feldman. Viewing twentieth-century music history through the lens of Sibelius sheds new light on what had begun to feel like all-too-familiar territory.

Ross really hits his stride once he clears the hurdle of 1945, in Part III. In a virtuosic display of erudition and unabashed enthusiasm he elucidates connections between "Bop, Rock, and the Minimalists," devotes an entire chapter to Benjamin Britten (still performed too rarely in the United States), provides keen insight into the music of composers in post-Soviet regions, and posits that the "center of [art music] gravity may shift permanently eastward" with the rise of China as a major figure in the industry (p. 519). One of the fascinating trends that emerges in chapter 15, "Sunken Cathedrals: Music at Century's End," is the return of opera as a significant genre after its relative neglect throughout much of the postwar period. In the last fifteen pages Ross invokes Stockhausen's massive seven-opera cycle *Licht*, Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, Lachenmann's *The Little Match Girl*, Desyatnikov's *Rosenthal's Children*, and Schnittke's *Historia von D. Johann Fausten*, culminating in a detailed account of Adams's *Nixon in China*. (Conspicuously absent is the popular American composer Jake Heggie, whose opera *Dead Man Walking* has been performed to worldwide acclaim.) If we are truly entering a new golden age of opera, particularly opera that partakes of both art and popular traditions, it will come as welcome news to Weill scholars.

Above I wrote that *The Rest Is Noise* is provocative, original, entertaining, and eminently readable. Those are not adjectives I use to describe the textbooks I normally deal with as a professor in a school of music. Maybe the necessary evil of chronological surveys does not lend itself to the kind of writing or thinking Ross offers here, but why shouldn't it? Granted it is not a textbook and could not substitute for one (although it could make an excellent companion volume in a music history course). The twentieth century was action-packed, yet no textbook I know even *begins* to convey the palpable excitement that animates Ross's prose, particularly in Part III. Perhaps the greatest compliment I can offer is the testimony that it inspired me to seek out music I did not know. If it does the same for other readers, Ross has done an invaluable service to the music of the past century.

Joy H. Calico
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Books

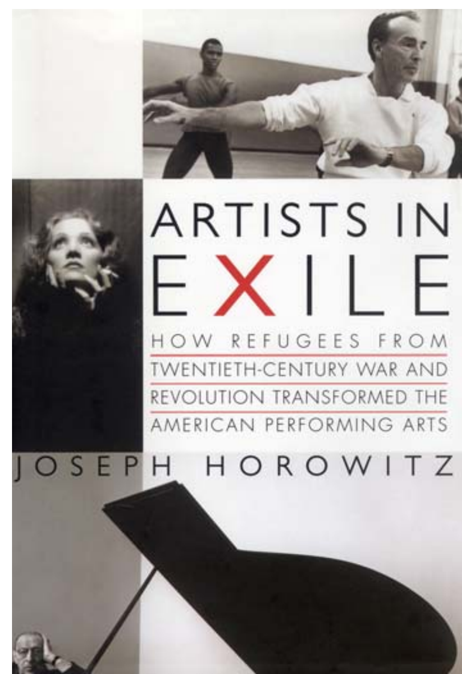
Artists in Exile: How Refugees from Twentieth-Century War and Revolution Transformed the American Performing Arts

Joseph Horowitz

New York: Harper, 2008, 458 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-06-074846-3

Joseph Horowitz is what Morris Dickstein calls a "double agent," a public intellectual who addresses a large audience with complex ideas. His seven books and frequent lectures on musical culture combine high intelligence with strong, sometimes controversial stances. His books have staying power: *Conversations with Arrau*, from 1982, continues to be one of the most original and subtle portraits of a great artist from the past thirty years. In *Artists in Exile*, Horowitz takes on his biggest subject to date, the interchange between Old and New World culture in the careers of émigrés. Rather than limiting himself to music, theater, film, acting, or dance, he takes on all of them, touching on mathematicians and scientists as well.

As in his previous works, Horowitz paints vivid portraits that linger in the mind. These émigrés are not just objects of analysis but three-dimensional characters in a tumultuous cultural drama. Most memorable are Stokowski in Philadelphia, "a hypnotic podium presence enforced by icy blue eyes" (p. 178); Schoenberg in Los Angeles, his "ferocious reputation . . . supported by scowling photographs evoking Boris Karloff in suit and tie" (p. 114);



Mitropoulos in New York, a "Dr. Caligari of the podium, clawing the air with huge hands, clenching his anchorite features into a demonic gargoyle" (p. 106); Serkin at the keyboard, his "wire-rim glasses, balding pate, angular limbs, and worried expression" creating "an impression of compelling probity" (p. 87). These personalities burst from the page in blazing color, and Horowitz once again rescues classical music from the dull writing that is surely one reason for its marginalization.

This book convincingly shows that German émigrés such as Murnau, Hindemith, and Krenek had the toughest time adjusting because they retained a cultural identity too strong to exchange for New World sensibilities. Some, like Toch and Zemlinsky, became lost souls, dying in obscurity. Russians, with their polyglot culture, stood a far better chance of creating a productive dialectic with the New World, especially when the art in question was not an entrenched American form. Balanchine, the epitome of this pattern, emerges as the book's triumphant figure, an innovator who created dance as a vital contemporary American art "frequently vitalized—as symphony and opera are not—by important new work" (p. 44). Others who succeeded were colorful iconoclasts who loved reinventing themselves, most notably Varèse, a "tidal force" who transcended "mummified" European models to find an authentically noisy American voice (p. 174).

American composers, ironically, found that voice elusive. Blinded by "an incurable Eurocentrism," they looked up to German émigrés as their models rather than Gottschalk, Ives, jazz, and slave song (p. 215). In a further irony, such European composers Delius who tapped unreservedly into black culture created enduring New World art.

Kurt Weill's refusal to be part of the "German colonization project"—his unstinting embrace of American culture—should make him a hero of this book, but Horowitz sides with detractors of American Weill. "A battered and worldly irony—a creative and resilient product of European suffering—is what makes the Brecht/Weill pieces matter," he argues, judging Weill's Broadway works a bland comedown, a series of collaborative compromises where even irony became "an innocuous diversion" (p. 156). One wonders how far battering and world-weariness can be taken, and why Weill, of all people, would want to continue in one mode indefinitely. Given his dramatic advocacy of jazz in Berlin, his embrace of Broadway should not be surprising. He was always a quick-change artist: like Whitman, his favorite American poet, he lived in the "eternal Now"; like Huckleberry Finn, whose saga he was celebrating when he died, he didn't "take no stock in dead people." Nonetheless, Horowitz concludes that "the legendary Berlin" furnished a *Zeitgeist* superior to America's, and that Weill's view of *Street Scene* as a continuation of his Berlin work "can only seem self-deluded" (p. 157). Those who sniff at American Weill will nod their heads in assent; those who are charmed by "It Never Was You," "September Song," "I'm a Stranger Here Myself," the "Ice Cream Sextet," and other gems from the *Street Scene* era are all too happy to participate in Weill's "delusion."

Much of this book is a delicate balancing act, with Horowitz weighing the welcoming freedom and spontaneity of American culture against its debilitating crassness. His detailed section on Rouben Mamoulian, the most even-handed and exhilarating portion of *Artists in Exile*, is so good that I wish Horowitz would take a break from his music beat and write a book on this remarkable innovator in drama and cinema. He also delivers a complex, poignant account of Koussevitzky, who had a hard time coaxing the Great American Symphony from young American composers but did get the Concerto for Orchestra from a dying Bartók, surely the greatest "American" work since Dvorák's New World Symphony.

Horowitz is as strong in his opinions as in his prose style, and some of his glummer generalizations call for a response. He puts down Billy Wilder as a shallow showman, completely missing his irony and embittered humanity; he snubs Lubitsch and Korngold as middlebrows mistaken for high, as if measuring brows is how we assess Hollywood; he states that most immigrants were "not able to sustain a full growth curve upon relocating," as if the growth curves of Hemingway, Salinger, Welles, Tennessee Williams, Francis Ford Coppola, Woody Allen, and other non-immigrant Americans are any fuller (p. 410); he denounces America's "culture of performance"—revisiting an important theme from his *Understanding Toscanini* (1987)—as if Clement, Paganini, Chopin, Liszt, and other Old World rock stars never existed (p. 409).

A less dispiriting assessment emerges if one tallies the New World influence on composers who sojourned rather than relocated in America and were not subject to the pressures of exile Horowitz so painstakingly documents. Dvorák's American work, as Horowitz persuasively points out, is the supreme example, but one can also celebrate Vaughan Williams's eloquent Whitman settings, Ravel's jazzy piano concertos, Britten's penetrating dramatizations of Melville and James, Messiaen's piercing evocation of New World landscape, and Tippett's soulful interpolation of spirituals and blues. The picture is also brighter if one includes some English-speaking immigrants Horowitz chooses to leave out: James Whale, who invented a new Hollywood Gothic; Hitchcock, who, like Weill managed to reach both intellectuals and the general public; Auden, who wrote some of his most memorable poetry in America and celebrated its "life of choice" in Britten's *Paul Bunyan*.

Horowitz does deliver a bright coda. Despite their frustrations and setbacks, these exiles "raised the bar" and unlocked "new possibilities" in every field, paving the way for a less problematic era (p. 411): the "tensions of forced migration—exile and nostalgia—have now abated"; a Pierre Boulez or Gidon Kremer can move through the Old and New Worlds with "perfect fluidity" (p. 412); new immigrant groups, most notably the Chinese, can create cross-cultural works that are "not merely fluent but eventful, dialectical" (p. 413). And surprisingly popular: on two successive evenings last April, I saw Tan Dun's new Piano Concerto, precisely the kind of cross-cultural work Horowitz describes, receive loud standing ovations at New York Philharmonic subscription concerts, something that rarely happens with contemporary music.

In the last pages, Horowitz quotes Soviet defector-pianist Alexander Toradze on his success and that of his colleagues in a country they regard as uniquely open and accepting: "I can't envision a group of performers in which 80 percent are not native-born succeeding anywhere else . . . This is something that could only happen in America" (p. 421). An exuberant artist, Toradze is the right performer to end an epic, sometimes dark drama that has a cheering final act.

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Performances

Der Silbersee: Ein Wintermärchen

Deutsches Symphonie Orchester Berlin

14–15 December 2007

A state ceremony in the home of high-brow culture: in the Berlin Philharmonic hall, seven hundred young police officers were sworn in on 14 December 2007, taking an oath to uphold the *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law) of the Federal Republic of Germany. As the season schedule would have it, this event was framed by two concert performances of *Der Silbersee*—the drama about the rural police officer and lottery winner Olim who puts humanity above both fear and duty—which provided a multi-layered backdrop to our own time from the collapse of the first German republic. The subtitle, *Ein Wintermärchen*, borrowed from Heine, already leaves little ambiguity: Weill's and Kaiser's musico-theatrical pathway through duty, forgiveness, profit, exploitation, and humanity is a drama of ideas—a "German" work shaped by the political events of its day. Ingo Metzmacher integrated the work into his first Berlin season, dedicated to the "German" in music: a consciously chosen counterpoint to Hans Pfitzner's cantata *Von deutscher Seele* that he had programmed for reunification day on 3 October.

Despite its rich and stylistically diverse score, *Der Silbersee* remains one of those works by Weill whose performance history is marked by constant compromises, partly due to the adverse political circumstances of the time—described in detail by the program notes—but also to the work's hybrid nature, which hovers between opera, *Singspiel*, fairy tale, and drama of ideas. Thus, concert adaptations must find a way to manage the text, which can hardly be presented unabridged in this format. The stage and screen actor Thomas Thieme took it upon himself to prepare the spoken text presented here. In doing so, he made even deeper cuts in the dialogue than Josef Heinzelmann did in his version, captured on the 1990 Capriccio recording. This meant that the Berlin audience would fail to grasp not only Kaiser's drama of ideas but also was left in the dark about such crucial dramatic details as the revelation that Olim shot Severin or Fennimore's humiliation in Act Three. Likewise, the blue-blooded Baron Laur and Frau von Luber were shorn of most of their malicious and cold-blooded words and deeds. At least the hellish music of the "Schlaraffenland" duet preserved their true character.

The adaptation inevitably catapulted Weill's score to center stage, offering Metzmacher the chance to present an emphatically symphonic interpretation that would be difficult to bring off in the theater. Obviously engaged, the conductor brought out not only the quasi-Mahlerian contrasts and orchestral colors of the score's march-like passages, he also did justice to the song style reminiscent of Eisler in nos. 3 and 9 ("Der Bäcker backt ums Morgenrot" and "Cäsars Tod") and the parodistic waltz bliss of the shop girls' duet, sung by Mojca Erdmann and Vanessa Barkowski, who try to find rhyme and reason in Economics 101. The Deutsche Symphonie Orchester responded enthusiastically to the energy of its new music director, not least in the effortless handling of the virtuoso wind and brass parts. The Rundfunkchor Berlin (directed by Sigurd Brauns) performed exquisitely and with perfect intonation, providing, as an epic-theater collective, the inner voices of the protagonists, who turn into "gekonnte Menschen" (accomplished human beings), as Kaiser put it.

The demanding hybrid tenor part of Severin was sung by Torsten Kerl, who earlier this season took the part of Pedro in d'Albert's *Tiefland*. Something of this character's powerful naturalism seems to have made its way into Kerl's interpretation of the unemployed pauper, especially near the beginning, when his performance lacked agility. Kerl was most convincing in his handling of the contrast between the revenge aria and the love duet, two numbers that, in this concert performance, occur nearly consecutively in Act Two. Christiane Oelze, who portrayed the "poor relation" Fennimore, displayed a gorgeous voice when she sang from the organ gallery in the finale of Act Three, but her lyric soprano lacked the decisive dash of aggressiveness needed for the combative tone of "Cäsars Tod." Aside from Thomas Thieme's pleasantly unemotional Olim and the narrator (Christian Ehrich), who read the most important stage directions, opera singers handled all the other parts. Stephan Rügamer, as the snobbish, amusement-seeking Laur, is heard only in his third-act duet. Hanna Schwarz, veteran of many Wagnerian battles, gave a splendidly acted performance of Frau von Luber as an aging diseuse (perhaps not entirely in the spirit of the piece). Burkhard Ulrich's Lottery Agent earned a special round of applause for his presentation of still-current investment advice, delivered in a devil's costume.

After a little more than two hours, the audience thanked the performers with warm applause (though not thunderous, since the hall was only two-thirds full). Metzmacher's interpretation achieved nearly everything possible given the format of a concert performance. But a musico-theatrical remainder is left dangling. To adopt, and adapt, the work's final line: for the sake of those who want to go further and seek dramatic coherence, *Der Silbersee* will have to be brought to the boards in Berlin.

Tobias Robert Klein
University of Magdeburg

Performances

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

Staatstheater Mainz

Premiere: 12 January 2008

It isn't often in opera productions that a single moment onstage crystallizes the themes presented by composer and librettist. But in *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* at the Staatstheater Mainz, director Matthias Fontheim startled us by starkly presenting a point implicit in the plot but never overtly shown (at least not in the eight or so productions I've seen previously). When Jimmy Mahoney cannot pay his bills, he is of course condemned to death. During the "Crane Duet," Jenny ties Jim up, and the crowd—the men and women of the town, Jenny's six girls, Moses, Fatty, and Begbick—gather to watch. After the duet, all at once and without warning, they pull out automatic pistols and mow Jimmy down in a hail of gunfire. No ambiguity about some nameless, faceless government ending Jimmy's life; it is the citizens of Mahagonny themselves who must destroy the humanity that he represents—and quickly.

The production's strongest point was its emphasis on the corruption inherent in the founding principles of Mahagonny. The two characters most affected were Jenny and (especially) Sparbüchsenbill. Jenny, because she remains coldly cynical and calculating throughout—there is never a sign that Jimmy's affection will overcome her relentless self-interest. Even more pointedly, Bill is portrayed as one whose morals are completely destroyed by greed. As the plot progresses, he emerges as Jenny's true love thanks to their shared lust for money. He has no qualms about taking Jenny from Jim, and no regrets over Jim's death, either. Bill and Jenny are seen canoodling at the edge of the stage during the execution and the finale, lost in their reverie of paid-for love. This unsentimental portrayal is diametrically opposed to the despair of Dale Duesing's Billy in the 1998 Salzburg production, and most others.

The stage was dominated by a huge, multi-level, eye-shaped video screen, with the center in sharp focus and the outer portion in softer focus. Different video projections appear intermittently; the videos comment on, rather than literally portray, the evolving story. For example, stock footage of a World War II bombing run (and its aftermath) provided an explanation for the bleak hopelessness that might have led people to seek a last chance in Mahagonny. The introduction of the four lumberjacks features old-fashioned cartoon scenes of dancing farm animals, suggesting a playful innocence that would soon be blighted. And the finale was very well done—rather than the usual slogans painted on signs, the screen showed constantly morphing pictures of politicians with speech balloons containing the absurd messages ("for the freedom of the rich," "for justice," etc.). The morphing effect was brilliant: the more they said, the more their duplicity was underscored.

Jimmy (Kor-Jan Dusseljee, who covered for Alexander Spemann in the first two performances) is shackled after the "Crane Duet," as a child's face looms on the video screen behind him. Photo: Martina Pipprich

The Staatstheater's General Music director, American-born Catherine Rückwardt, led a musical performance that brought out many of the detailed nuances of Weill's complex score. She handled the integration of jazz elements into the score superbly. The orchestral playing was excellent, with the unfortunate exception of the trumpeters—some ugly gaffes really stood out—but Rückwardt recovered nicely and kept the musical line moving.

The singing was generally good or even excellent. Alexander Spemann took top honors as Jimmy Mahoney; his singing was beautiful and very natural, completely free of the unneeded emoting that some singers bring to the role. Abbie Furmansky was very good as Jenny; her voice was solid and well-supported through the full range of the part, although she won't make anyone forget Stratas at the Met or Inga Nielsen in Hamburg. In fairness, because the production presents Jenny as emotionally numbed, Furmansky has no real opportunity to sing with expression. Edith Fuhr struck a nicely nuanced note as Begbick—singing, not croaking, the music and blending smoothly with her henchmen. She exuded a slightly faded sexiness (Begbick should not be portrayed as an old crone) and wore her glamorous costumes with real style. The other three lumberjacks did well vocally and dramatically; Frank Dolphin Wong was especially strong as a last-minute replacement in the role of Trinity Moses. The role of the "Speaker" was played in the style of a nightclub emcee, introducing each scene with a short comment. This worked because it was not overdone, and because it matched the razzle-dazzle of some of the video projections quite well.

It struck me after the performance that *this* was the type of production Los Angeles Opera should have presented last February—an innovative use of visual multimedia combined with high musical values—not the disastrous hodge-podge that John Doyle and his miscast singers (Griffey excepted) spewed onto the stage. And consider this—$190 for the L.A. ticket, 36 euros (about $53) for the Mainz ticket—you don't always get what you pay for.

Robert Gonzales
Fort Lauderdale

Performances

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

Aalto-Musiktheater Essen

Premiere: 26 January 2008

In his program note for the new production of *Mahagonny* in Essen, director Barrie Kosky posits that Weill's music reflects a number of Old Testament influences. Kosky makes such influences the basis for a sensational, theatrical production that seems to ask what would have happened if the Hebrews had continued to worship the Golden Calf after Moses returned from Mount Sinai.

In fact, the proceedings begin with two avatars of Moses himself placing two sets of the tablets containing the Ten Commandments (written in Hebrew) on either side of the stage apron, perhaps intended as a foil to Mahagonny's "do-as-you-like" ethos. Whisky flows from water coolers, reminding us that whisky in Mahagonny is really the water of life. Although Kosky's usage of biblical themes was inconsistent, especially in Act Two, it clearly implied that those who founded Mahagonny, as well as those who came there seeking fulfillment, were beyond redemption, biblical or otherwise. For example, Jenny and the other girls are all quite pregnant as they came on stage to deliver "O Moon of Alabama"—what could be more devastating to a woman making her living through sex? Or the lumberjacks, whose ideal camaraderie, emphasized by the fact that they looked and dressed virtually alike, is broken, resulting in the destruction of the group. Kosky's penchant for the bizarre and extravagant overwhelms his concept at times, but the biblical framework reinforces the persistent themes of emptiness and despair.

Kosky's Mahagonnites are in constant motion, and the set design reflects this basic feature—each side of the stage is dominated by a huge structure with openings at the midpoints for entrances and exits. The space in between resembles a pathway or road, emphasizing the transient nature of the town. The townspeople often break into spirited dances, sometimes on the spur of the moment (not unlike Kupfer's 2005 production in Dresden). When the town is founded, a large red cloth is attached to one of the blades of a perpetually turning ceiling fan, which remains visible throughout the opera. This simple element not only reinforces the sense of motion, but it symbolizes the fact that Mahagonny, stuck in an unalterable rut, will never change.

The first act ends with the muted chorus celebrating the passing of the hurricane, but not before Jenny delivers stillborn twins after performing simulated oral sex on Jimmy. After intermission, the production shifts into full-blown travesty—the opera becomes a bizarre musical revue made up of equal parts over-the-top bawdiness and cautionary tale. The stage swarms with characters in the most garish costumes—Fatty becomes a rotund Vegas showman in a glitter suit, while Moses is transformed into a nightmare vision of Pippi Longstocking. The Men of Mahagonny cavort in hotpants and pastel wigs. The center of the stage is now filled with an enormous hollow cow's skull which becomes the playing space for the rest of Act Two.

For "Eating," the big skull's eye socket is completely filled with a gross, enormous version of Jakob Schmidt, so huge that he could not even reach his zipper to relieve himself (it falls to Fatty to extract a grotesque fake organ—this elicited a couple of loud boos even as the scene was still going on). "Loving" took place inside the mouth of the skull; the attendants disinfect each customer before allowing him inside, and some customers emerge bloodied (the wages of sin? Or an allusion to Jenny's bloodied stillborn babies?). "Fighting" is a WWE-style grudge match held atop the skull.

At the end of the second act, things turn *really* nasty. Trinity Moses, attired as a Charlton Heston-style Moses, does not wait for the trial to administer biblical justice; he gouges Jimmy's eyes out, making his aria even more wrenching than usual. After the Benares song (the Crane Duet was not used in this production), Jimmy is further mutilated as Moses tears his tongue out. No longer able to speak, Jimmy uses his own blood to write out his last few lines, the last of which is to ask for a drink of water—an unmistakable reference to Christ's last words. Moses then shoots him in the back of the head, and we are left to wonder if Moses put him out of his misery or just grew tired of the lethal game.

After all the violence and empty promises, God Himself must come to Mahagonny and answer to the people. This proves singularly unsatisfying, since the natives pay no more attention to God's words than to Jimmy's. This scene supplies the culmination of Kosky's biblical allegory, not only reinforcing the hopelessness of the inhabitants but making Mahagonny timeless, an ineradicable part of the human condition.

The musical values were uniformly high. All the performers sang well and gave Kosky's concept their all, so it is hard to single anyone out. I would give "first among equals" honors to Astrid Kropp, because she succeeds in humanizing Jenny and making us feel her pain.

Stefan Soltesz led an orchestral performance of real beauty—sometimes sounding like a chamber group, with individual instrumental voices given prominence, but unleashing the full forces when instrumental fury was called for. The woodwinds especially were in fine voice, and the brass players were on their best behavior.

Robert Gonzales
Fort Lauderdale

Surrounded by the Men of Mahagonny, Fatty (Robert Wörle) devours a rat during the Gluttony scene. Photo: Matthias Jung

Performances

Lady in the Dark

Théâtre de la Renaissance Oullins

Premiere: 28 April 2008

Two years after Opéra de Lyon presented its artistically rewarding mini-festival of works by Weill (reviewed Fall 2006), the company has offered an unofficial, even mini-er Ira Gershwin festival. Proceedings opened with the French premiere of *Lady in the Dark*, a co-production with Théâtre de la Renaissance, in the suburb of Oullins; *Porgy and Bess* followed at the opera house in May.

Scott Stroman, who conducted *One Touch of Venus* in 2006, took the baton again for *Lady*, and this performance places him in the first rank of today's Weill interpreters. His background in both classical music and jazz affords him rare sensitivity to *Lady*'s demands. Not only did Stroman grasp the differences among the several jazz styles in the score, he cut loose with them, too. I've never heard this music sound livelier or more up to date, and I hope Stroman will continue his Weill ventures.

Amid the two-steps and the swing, Weill's distinctive harmonies and orchestral colors—shimmering strings or thundering drums—emerged to build dramatic tension throughout each dream sequence, and Stroman skillfully managed the mood shifts in individual numbers. ("This Is New," to cite but one example, progressed from a tender, rather dopey love song to a raging nightmare.) The ensemble of twenty-one musicians from the Orchestre de l'Opéra de Lyon is accustomed to a varied diet at the opera house, yet they played with special exuberance.

Theatrically, the news was almost as good. Jean Lacornerie, general director of the Renaissance, emphasized *Lady*'s contemporary relevance. Nearly seventy years after its premiere, society is still uncomfortable with strong women and the sacrifices they must make to achieve their successes. In France, such issues surfaced during the last presidential election, when Socialist candidate Ségolène Royal was criticized for being either too touchy-feely or too bitchy, by turns; as Lacornerie noted in an interview, there is as yet no feminine equivalent for *grand patron* ("big boss"). His updating, conveyed through sets and costumes, seemed sensible. The book scenes generated real tension and sympathy (for once, Kendall Nesbitt didn't come across as a buffoon), while the dream sequences left one wondering what Lacornerie could do with *Love Life*.

His staging of *Lady* showed, somewhat perversely, how close Lacornerie came to hitting the jackpot with *Venus*. The Théâtre de la Renaissance is considerably smaller than the Broadway theaters of Weill's day, requiring smaller casts and simpler stagecraft. Presumably, the budgets aren't Broadway-size, either. So with *Venus* Lacornerie seemed perpetually constrained by his limited means; most notably, the ballets and set decorations were a disappointment. But the dream sequences in *Lady* seemed to liberate him. There was no need to try to make six dancers look like two dozen, no need for realism in the sets; Liza's three dreams were decorated mostly with shifting, sparkling curtains.

Even in the book scenes, Lacornerie resorted to the simplest means. Set designer Bruno de Lavenère represented the psychiatrist's office with a basic black flat that descended from the flies; Liza spoke to him through a little window. (Late in the evening, it was revealed that the actress playing Liza, Cécile Camp, was standing high on a ladder.) The device smacked more of the confessional than the couch, but Liza's three-session therapy *is* pretty miraculous. Behind the flat, set changes could be made efficiently, so the pace never slackened. With minimal set dressing and a chic black-and-white motif (even for wigs, costumes, and lipstick), Liza's office at *Allure* magazine became a temple of sophistication.

And so Lacornerie had more resources, financial and imaginative, to stage the dream sequences, which bubbled with magic tricks (supervised here by Thierry Collet but strangely absent from *Venus*) and frothy humor. Posing for her postage stamp, Liza squeezed into a tiny frame—and disappeared. Called on to answer Kendall Nesbitt's marriage proposal, she was fitted with a collar and a sword was driven through her neck. Singing "One Life to Live," she floated and soared above the stage on a Luma crane (normally used to hoist movie cameras for overhead angles). The dreams featured plenty of nudity and latex and tended to slip rather easily into nightmares, but then, for all his reveling in American popular culture, Lacornerie remains a European stage director.

His biggest gamble paid off—just. Lacornerie divided the role of Liza between two performers: for book scenes, Cécile Camp, with her tall, lean physique and commanding stage presence; for the musical numbers, Tina May, with her light, white-toned, sometimes reedy jazz soprano with a pleasing vibrato on the high notes. Though the casting probably arose from necessity, it can be defended intellectually. By design, Liza's dream personality differs radically from her everyday personality, and the two Lizas find their antecedents in the Annas of *Die sieben Todsünden*: *Lady* makes contradictory demands on its star, just as *Todsünden* does.

At first, the split casting proved jarring. Camp and May look nothing alike, despite excellent wigs by Cécile Kretschmar. Moreover, the actress playing Real Liza

Russell Paxton (Jacques Verzier) directs a photo shoot for *Allure* Magazine. Photo: Stofleth

Liza (Tina May), poised on the Luma crane during the Glamour Dream. Photo: Stofleth

must be thoroughly compelling to keep the audience's interest: Dream Liza's spectacular antics could easily overshadow Real Liza. Fortunately, both actresses' charms surmounted our reservations as the evening progressed—and once Lacornerie established his conceit, he began to play with it. During Act II, Dream Liza began to appear, phantom-like, in the book scenes, and Real Liza turned up in the Circus Dream, executing impressive high kicks.

Robin Chemin's costume designs ran the gamut from Liza's smart gray suit (ideal for the character) to lingerie for Misses Stevens, Foster and Du Bois (not so ideal). Her rigorous black-and-white palette for the *Allure* offices contrasted effectively with the bold colors of the dreams: saturated golds and reds, cobalt blues, and lurid purple latex jodhpurs for Jacques Verzier's Ringmaster.

From the outset of the first dream, in "Oh Fabulous One," Verzier's campy Russell Paxton was undercut by Liza's dream suitors, flamboyant, shirtless Chelsea boys. Poor Russell couldn't possibly outdo them, so his book scenes fell flat. But Verzier (whose "West Wind" was a highlight of *Venus*) is a genuine musical-theater trouper, an expert dancer with a natural Broadway baritone. He took unconcealed delight in "Tschaikowsky."

As Randy Curtis, Vincent Heden looked more like Liza's son than her love interest (Victor *Immature*?), but he's pin-up cute, and he offered a clear, agile tenor. Gilles Bugeaud (Zuvetli in *Venus*) lent his bracing baritone to "Girl of the Moment" and his dramatic conviction to Kendall Nesbitt's scenes. Gilles Vajou played an adorable Rodney in *Venus*, but for *Lady* he was saddled with Charley Johnson's role—a boor by contemporary standards who nevertheless gets the girl. More actor than singer, he threw himself into the dream sequences with zest.

Florence Pelly proved more confident as Maggie Grant than as *Venus*' Molly Grant (though they are really the same part), and she sang and danced bravely. Jean-Pierre Descheix offered a nuanced portrayal of the unflappable Dr. Brooks (who never appears onstage), and he gamely took part in the ensemble, even playing the circus elephant. As Sutton/Barbara, sweet-faced Landy Andriamboavonjy stood out, with a burbling mezzo-soprano and a surprising flair for tap dancing.

René Fix translated Moss Hart's book into French, but musical numbers were sung in a giddy mélange of Stéphane Laporte's ingenious French translations and Ira Gershwin's originals. Almost everyone in the cast boasted good English diction and commendable American accents.

One problem with Hart's book is that there's quite a long stretch without music at the end of the play. After so much music—especially the unbridled Circus Dream—the audience needs further spectacle to sustain its enthusiasm, and Hart doesn't provide it. As compensation, Stroman took the stage and joined the entire cast in a reprise of "Tschaikowsky" at the curtain call, drawing lusty approval from the full house.

Serge Dorny, *intendant* of Opéra de Lyon, has earned the right to bask in the applause. In three short years, he has brought to Lyon *Der Lindberghflug* and *Die sieben Todsünden* (a double bill directed by François Girard and conducted by Roberto Minczuk in 2006) and the French premieres of *Venus* and *Lady*—and every production has met exceptionally high musical standards.

William V. Madison
Paris

Liza (Cécile Camp) at ease. Photo: Stofleth

Performances

Lost in the Stars

Opera Pittsburgh

Premiere: 21 February 2008

Weill and Maxwell Anderson wrote *Lost in the Stars* (1949) in an America deeply in denial over racial inequity. The power of this "musical tragedy" gained urgency from ugly contemporary social realities—brutalities of segregation, Jim Crow laws, civil and economic injustice—that persisted after the United States had helped win a world war against fascism and that helped safeguard individual rights and dignity. Over the following decades, the civil rights movement would reform the nation's laws and practices. Racial (not to mention gender and ethnic) disparity has changed, and the show's message has shifted for 21st-century audiences.

Anderson based the libretto on Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), which readers and audiences understood not only as a glimpse inside the destructiveness of South African apartheid but also as a critique of America's torpidity in confronting its racism. Sixty years later, racial prejudice is still with us, but America is no longer two quite separate and unequal societies.

The audience for the premiere of this new and excellent production responded accordingly. African-Americans filled two-thirds of the seats in Pittsburgh's Byham Theater, among them prominent cultural and professional leaders. A drummer from Zaire who has resided for decades in the United States led the African drummers who entertained in the lobby prior to the show. And the mixed audience seemed not only at ease with its varieties of skin tone and culture, but also willing to accept the drama and morality presented on stage primarily as a religious story of love's redemption.

Perhaps the libretto's most assertive instance of racial disparity occurs in the third number, "Train to Johannesburg," with its lyrics, "White man go to Johannesburg / He come back / Black man go to Johannesburg / Never come back." Audiences in the 1940s and 1950s (as I understand from those who attended early performances) felt empathetic and impassioned outrage. At the premiere of this production, strong voices, sharp diction, energy, and palpable tension from Leader (Larry J. Giddens Jr.) and chorus evoked appreciative nods from the listeners but no discernible visceral response. The minimalist set and props (by Danila Korogodsky) abetted emotional detachment. The actors mimed climbing aboard an invisible train, shuffled offstage to the chugging rhythms of the music, crossed and recrossed the stage as the "train" receded into the distance, preceded by successively smaller posterboard cut-outs of a locomotive and railroad cars.

Otherwise, the simple space and properties—a bare stage surrounded by a black void except for painted corrugated surfaces (evoking Shantytown?) behind the chorus benches; plain chairs, tables, and benches that were sometimes arranged at angles to frame spaces suggesting rooms or houses; and tall grass or trees suggesting veldt or hills, in small wagons that glided on or off stage—allowed for uncluttered scenes, quick changes, and an array of possible interpretations. Tiny lamps suspended from the fly bars, dimmed or brightened and raised or lowered, represented stars/souls. A dollhouse-size model, lit from within, of the home of the one enlightened white man—who becomes the murder victim—was lowered onto the stage during scenes set in the house. The production brought the chorus and Leader into the auditorium via a passarelle (a curved walkway between audience and pit), with platforms for the chorus against both walls extending beyond the first rows of the audience.

Stephen Kumalo (Herbert Perry) and James Jarvis (Martin Giles) reconcile at the end of the play. Photo: Patti Brahim

Julius Rudel led the orchestra, hidden in the pit below stage and passarelle, which performed with immaculate attention to the score and with unsurpassed phrasing and ensemble. The only other time I have admired a theater orchestra's performance as much was at the Metropolitan Opera. Never has Weill's eclectic blending of ballads, hymns, jazz, and folk song made more sense or flowed more seamlessly from one scene to the next.

The remarkable cast sang expressively and acted with conviction throughout. To mention only some of the highlights, twins Herbert and Eugene Perry played Reverend Stephen Kumalo and his son Absalom, respectively; Herbert's convincing acting and expressive baritone provided a solid center in nearly every scene. The striking resemblance of the two actors made breathtakingly clear the psychic connection between father and son. Kevin Brown was persuasively immoral as Stephen's brother John Kumalo, and Martin Giles brought fire to the role of conscience-stricken James Jarvis. Denise Sheffey Powell, in a seductive red dress as Linda, stirred the audience with a raunchy "Who'll Buy," and eleven-year-old W. Roger Randolph III was winsome as nephew Alex. But the biggest applause went to Dzidzofe Avouglan as Irina, who created an intimate bond with the audience through her warm, glossy vocal tone and infectious spirit.

Lost in the Stars is a moral drama told through a cyclical narrative of learned injustice, in which power (desire, greed) seems invariably to triumph over ideals (personal fulfillment, justice). But it leaves room for hope; it remains at its core a celebration of the potential for human dignity, and a call to strive toward our highest values. Weill fans can be grateful to director Jonathan Eaton, conductor Julius Rudel, and co-producers Opera Theater of Pittsburgh and the Virginia Arts Festival for bringing it to life in this rare and splendid production.

Deane Root
University of Pittsburgh

Newsletter Reader Survey

With the *Kurt Weill Newsletter* in its 25th year, we are asking for your help in telling us what you like and don't like about the design, content, and purpose of our publication. No matter whether you've been reading the *Newsletter* for years or you hold a copy in your hands for the first time—we invite all of you to make your opinons known. Please answer the questions below and return the form to the Kurt Weill Foundation by fax or post; please append additional pages as needed. Your answers and comments will help us improve the *Newsletter*, and we will gladly consider all suggestions as we prepare for its second quarter century.

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If you could change *one* aspect of the *Newsletter*, what would it be and how would you change it?

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