

Kurt Weill's opera

Der Silbersee: Ein Wintermärchen (1932):

an example of 'Der Neue Oper'

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Research report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music in the Wits School of Arts, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand.

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DECLARATION

I declare that this Research Report is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Music by Coursework and Research Report (Performance) in the School of Arts, faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other University.

_____ day of _____ 2006

ABSTRACT

This research report examines the opera *Der Silbersee: Ein Wintermärchen* (*The Silver Lake: a Winter's Tale*), 1932, by Kurt Weill and Georg Kaiser, as an example of what Weill defined as 'new opera', in his essay 'Der Neue Oper'.¹ It will discuss reasons for the work's rarity in its relative neglect as well as its significance as an example of what Kim Kowalke has called a synthesis of Weill's 'mature style'. Thus it will also be demonstrated that the work, even though rarely performed and often overlooked, is an important bridge between the works of Weill's 'German period' and his later works in the United States. It will be established that the work is of musicological significance as well as of interest and relevance to present-day theatregoers. The research argues that the work, though written in Germany during the 1930s as a form of operatic protest, is worthy of being seen as a timeless and universal piece, deserving of more attention. This investigation will be accomplished through an analysis of Weill's own writings found in his many essays, translated and collected by Kim Kowalke in his book *Kurt Weill in Europe*, through an examination of the historical and socio-political perspective of the work, as well as in a musical analysis.

¹ The essay entitled 'Der Neue Oper' which Weill wrote in 1926 is a core text in my Research Report (see Chapter 4). According to correct German Grammar, this essay should have thus been titled 'Die Neue Oper', as 'Oper' is a feminine noun in German. Naturally, this has created a certain amount of confusion as to what Weill actually meant by this title. Upon the consultation of a German speaking person, I have deduced that Weill indeed made no grammatical mistake at all. It is possible to conclude then that 'Der Neue Oper' is supposed to mean 'Of the New Opera', which may indicate its' genre. 'Die Neue Oper' meaning 'The New Opera' could thus then become a term for the characteristics of this new opera Form. Therefore, in this Research Report, I have tried to remain as true to this principle as possible; when mentioning Weill's essay or the genre of 'The New Opera', I have used the term 'Der Neue Oper'. In discussing the characteristics of 'The New Opera's' Form, I have referred to it as 'Die Neue Oper'.

PREFACE AND AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In December 2000 I was notified that I had been chosen for the part of Shop Girl 1 in a production of Kurt Weill's *Der Silbersee* to be given at the Spier Summer Opera Festival, held in conjunction with Broomhill Opera London and The Spier Arts Trust.² Naturally I was very excited and accepted the role. In my enthusiasm, I raced off to the library to find a score, CD recording or even just a synopsis of the work; I had never heard of it before. In fact I knew very little about Kurt Weill; only that he had written the famous tune 'Mack the Knife', which I later learned originated from *The Threepenny Opera*, and was subsequently included in *Lost In The Stars*. (A friend of mine had played in a production of the latter when it was staged by the Pro Musica Orchestra in Roodepoort.) I was disappointed, when I could find no score, no recording and no synopsis of *Der Silbersee*. Then I came across Kim Kowalke's book *Kurt Weill in Europe* in the Wits University Library and was thrilled to find a few snippets included in it.

I liked what I tried out on the piano. Through my local municipal library I contacted all the major libraries in the country in an attempt to track down the score. Again, I was disappointed. I phoned Spier, and was told that copies would be arriving from England. This 'score', I was later to learn, was a hand-written copy of the original manuscript, possibly borrowed from the Kurt Weill Foundation in New York, and then presumably photocopied for the Spier production. I heard the work for the first time in January 2001.

Thus began my love of *Der Silbersee*. The Spier performances were exhilarating and challenging. I enjoyed singing Weill's music, finding it new and different and reflective of an era of which I had previously known little. The more I listened to and studied it, the more I began to appreciate the significance of the work. At the same time, however, I wondered why none of us knew of this composition's existence and also why I had not sung any Kurt Weill before. I decided when I came back to Johannesburg ten weeks later that *Der Silbersee* would make a

² The Spier Summer Festival takes place every year at Spier Wine Estate just outside Stellenbosch in the Western Cape, South Africa.

fascinating topic for the research component of my Master's degree; I also decided I would like to include some of Weill's music in my final recital for the degree, and this is something that I have done. In writing about the opera, I felt that I would be able to share my affection for it with others, and help to make it more popular.

I am very grateful to my singing teacher, Carla Pohl, who encouraged me to audition for Broomhill Opera; otherwise I would never have come across *Der Silbersee*. Of course I was also very grateful to have been chosen for the part. As such, I have to thank my generous husband and daughter Emma, then aged two, who encouraged me to spend ten weeks in Cape Town in early 2001 as a member of the cast of *Der Silbersee*. I most grateful to the directors of The Spier Arts Trust who took the risk of staging such a rare work, and for the opportunity they gave me to be part of it. With reference to this research report, I would also like to thank my parents, husband and daughters who have supported, encouraged and helped me. I am indebted also to members of the Wits Music staff who have given me advice and guidance, and especially to Mrs Sally Dowes- Dekker, and my supervisors Professors Mary Rörich and Christine Lucia; their input and encouragement have meant a great deal to me, and I have valued the time and effort they have put into the conceptualising and writing of this research report. To Mrs Karin Human, Grayston Preparatory School's computer laboratory teacher, I also extend my thanks: she made it possible for me to work on my report in her computer centre when I was not teaching. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to and admiration for singers and Weill enthusiasts like Lotte Lenya and the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music who managed to keep Kurt Weill's music safe and alive so that others - including myself nearly 70 years later - are still able to enjoy it.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Kurt Weill is considered one of the most interesting composers of the post World War I era (Drew and Robinson 2001,2(27): 220) and arguably the most important figure to date in the evolution of modern forms of musical theatre. This is not only evident in his compositions but also in his musical ideals. Expressed in essays and articles on music, the stage and composition, they have made a significant contribution to the music of the twentieth century. In this research report I examine one of the least known of Weill's German operas, *Der Silbersee*, by means of an analysis, a political contextualisation, and a broader framing of Weill's contribution to contemporary music theatre. In Chapter 1 I view his career as a whole, arguing that his contribution, although sometimes perceived as uneven, was in fact extremely sensitive to time and place, and always innovatory. In Chapter 4 I extend the discussion of Weill's 'new opera', by studying his theorising on the subject. I then discuss the performance status of *Der Silbersee* and attempt to find reasons for its marginal location in the music theatre repertoire. I conclude by examining its position at the culmination of Weill's German career, and at the point at which he realised he would have to leave the country of his birth. My intention is, therefore, to situate the work historically and politically, and show that it occupies a transitional position between the two apparently different styles that are associated with his respective careers in Europe and America.

Being German; becoming American: an overview and defence of Weill's dual composing career

Charles Hamm writes: 'There is no more persistent thread in the literature than that of the "two Weills", according to which there is a considerable gap in musical style and artistic integrity between his German works and those written in America...' (2004: 243). Certainly, Kurt Weill's composing career does seem divided into two halves, and it is this that has both secured his very

particular reputation in the twentieth century and also caused the most debate about whether this was to his advantage or detriment. His first composing career was conducted in Germany in the 1920s and early 30s; the second in America in the later 1930s and 40s. However one judges the differences between these two musical incarnations, it has to be said that in both places he revealed an extraordinary ability to respond to different cultural climates and musical accents.

Germany in the post World War 1 period was a place fraught with contradictions and a sense of impending catastrophe. But, as is often the case in times of crisis, artistic creativity flourished. Paul Johnson writes that 'German civilisation reached its gaudiest flowering during the 1920s, when Germany, for a brief period, became the world-centre of ideas and art' (1983: 12). Concerts and operatic performances in Berlin featured artists like Otto Klemperer, Bruno Walter, Richard Strauss, George Szell, Arturo Toscanini, Beniamino Gigli, Pablo Casals and Alfred Cortot (Johnson 1983: 113); the dramatic stage, hosted by men like Bertolt Brecht, Georg Kaiser and Carl Sternheim, played to full houses; and films like *The Blue Angel* (Joseph von Sternberg) and *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang), (Johnson 1983: 113) announced Germany's leadership both in the world of popular entertainment and the avant-garde. Modern German culture and the post-war Weimar Republic thus provided ideal sites for experimentation and social commentary and Weill used them brilliantly both to trigger thematic content and also to develop innovative forms for the stage. Responding to this same climate of radicalism, German opera houses proved keen to fund and produce the works that resulted.

These years spent writing innovative works for the German stage taught Weill that the German public could best be reached through a musical language that was immediate, 'colloquial', and part of their world. He had something important to say, something that was intensely bound up with the time in which he was living, and he wanted to find appropriate ways in which to say it. After it opened to capacity audiences on 31 August 1928, his *Threepenny*

Opera or *Die Dreigroschenoper*, ‘swept across Europe – within one year’ (Kowalke 1979: 67). By the end of that time, it had been performed ‘more than 4200 times’ and translated into eighteen languages (Ibid.). K. H. Kowalke suggests that a major reason for the opera’s success was its ‘universality’ that ‘was immediately recognisable’ (Kowalke 1979: 65). It is indeed this opera that has become Weill and Brecht’s ‘classic’, ‘the *Urform* or prototype of opera’, in Weill’s words (Ibid.). In *Die Musik* 21 December 1928, Theodor W. Adorno wrote that ‘*Die Dreigroschenoper* is the most important event of musical theatre since Berg’s *Wozzeck*’ (quoted in Kowalke 1979: 65).

But a ‘language’ or vernacular developed for the German public did not necessarily travel beyond national borders, as Weill was to discover when his German works failed on the American stage. In order to achieve the same level of success in his new home, the United States, he realised he would need to write music that was grounded in the American cultural vernacular: audience taste in America, as in Germany, was strongly determined by its own particular socio-political and environmental factors, and, besides the lapse in time, the two countries represented very different experiences of modernity.

Weill’s need, at different times in his career, to adopt to two different cultures accounts for what Kim Kowalke and others have referred to as the ‘dichotomy’ or ‘apparent *volte-face*’ (Jarman 1982: 132) in his musical style. In his earlier ‘plays with music’ the composer had been writing for and about an aggressive and demoralised post-World War 1 Germany; in permanent exile in the United States of America in the late 30s and 40s, he was responding to a hedonistic society framed by totally different cultural imperatives. As Weill himself once remarked: ‘A composer must know for whom he is composing’ (quoted in Jarman 1982:135).

Douglas Jarman observes that admirers of Weill’s European works generally reacted negatively to his American shows, condemning them as ‘clichés of the

Broadway musical'. They claimed that the composer had compromised his artistic and intellectual values in favour of 'commercial' ones:

To most admirers of Weill's European works, his output during the last fifteen years of his life comes as a profound shock. In these late works Weill the European intellectual, Weill the ironic observer of the political and social ills of his time, Weill the moralist – even Weill the composer with a limited but nonetheless individual and disturbing voice – seems to have disappeared. Instead, there emerges a picture of a composer willing to adopt the musical clichés of the Broadway musical and only too eager to embrace its commercial values (Jarman 1982: 132).

Jarman goes on to remark that those 'interested in his European works primarily for literary, social or political reasons' (Ibid.) favoured the notion that Weill was unable to compose when not inspired by Brecht or the political or social environment of the inter-war years in Germany. Alternatively, or in addition, they found it 'hard to believe that the sophisticated composer of *Mahagonny* could have employed the naïve, and frequently sentimental, musical language of the American works' (Ibid.). However, Jarman's final conclusion is that these claims are unfair. Given the exigencies of the political circumstances that directed the course of Weill's life, his musical career was nothing less than extraordinary: the composer's German works are significant in their own right, marvellously innovative and attuned to their time, but they also signal his eventual move towards the musical, a move he made in America. As Drew and Robinson put it: 'His successful and innovatory works for Broadway during the 1940s was a development in more popular terms of the exploratory stage works that had made him the foremost avant-garde theatre composer of the Weimar Republic ' (sic) (Drew and Robinson 2001,2(27): 220).

Der Silbersee: The midpoint

Der Silbersee, written in Germany in 1932 at the midpoint of Weill's career, is an opera or 'play with music', as the composer insisted it be called. Although it is less well known than works that were composed before and after, it represents a synthesis of his mature musical style and was written at a

particularly prolific time in his life. Kowalke writes that *Der Silbersee* is a 'virtual compendium of stylistic features also found in his other works' and provides 'the basis...for a summary of attributes of the mature style' (1979: 299). In fact *Der Silbersee*, in its fusion of operatic, avant-garde and popular elements, forms a bridge between the exploratory works of the 'German period' and the 'popular hits' of the 'American period'. It is a work which both 'spans categories' (Weill quoted in Heinzelmann 1990: 22) and represents the genre that has become known as 'Die neue Oper'. This will be shown in a detailed analysis of the work in Chapter 5.

***Der Silbersee*: a performance and recording history**

Unlike most of his other major German works, *Der Silbersee* has not been widely written about. There are three essays that directly address the work: 'Music as Metaphor: Aspects of *Der Silbersee*' by Ian Kemp (1986); a short analysis of the music in the chapter entitled 'Weill's Music, 1926-1933' in Kowalke (1979); and '*Der Silbersee*: A Documentation', compiled by Josef Heinzelmann for the 1990 CD recording on Capriccio.

The opera's performance and recording history is equally scant: in fact it has been performed only nine times in total since its première in February 1933. Kemp observes: 'A mutilated version of the work was performed in Berlin in 1955, concert versions at the Holland Festival in 1971 and Berlin Festival in 1975. None of these performances represented the real *Der Silbersee*' (1986: 134). The opera has been recorded only four times (1933, 1989, 1990 and 1996). The score and libretto are difficult to access (out of print and housed in the Kurt Weill Foundation in New York) and there is no standard English translation of the libretto. Thus opera companies have had to adapt and translate the work in order to produce it. When we performed the work in Cape Town, photocopied hand-written and hand-typed scores were flown in from London. We were told to be very careful with them, as they were the only available copies. Due to its length (three and a half hours or as Mario Mercado in the booklet accompanying the BMG recording claims, four hours

and 85 minutes of which are music), most performances of the work are done with cuts (it is important to note that in much of the literature I researched was conflicting on this point. Out of my own experience of the work I can vouch for the fact that the music lasts for longer than 85 minutes) – which means neglecting certain characters like The Fat Policeman and The Doctor. Certain parts of the score or dialogue have also been altered or excluded.

In 1980 *Der Silbersee* was staged in English in New York City as *The Silver Lake*. In 1982, it was produced by students at the University of Manchester under the same title. Although this was an adaptation of the original (translated by Raymond Fyrness), an attempt was made to retain the work's authenticity and fewer cuts were made than it seems in previous productions mentioned above. In 1983, *Der Silbersee* was staged in Zurich, but the libretto was condensed and the musical score 'compromised' (Kemp 1986:134). The work was staged in 1985 in Gera and Karl-Marx-Stadt in East Germany, and in Recklinghausen in West Germany. In 2000 Broomhill Opera (London) produced *The Silver Lake*; this version was translated by the well-known British satirist, Rory Bremmer. The score was a hand-written transcript made from the original score (housed in the Kurt Weill Foundation); as already noted, the score is out of print.

This production was brought to South Africa in 2001 and performed at the Spier Amphitheatre in Stellenbosch. The cast – of which I was a member, playing the role of Shop Girl 1 – consisted of local actors and singers, with the exception of the role of Frau Von Luber who was played by British actress Buffy Davis.

Four recordings of *Der Silbersee* exist: three recent CDs (Nonesuch DB-79003, New York City Opera, with Julius Rudel conducting, Capriccio CD 60 011-2 with Jan Latham-Köning conducting), and BMG RCA Red Seal 09026 63447 2 with Markus Stenz conducting the London Sinfonietta), and an older recording of some of the songs sung by Ernst Busch in the 1933 première, issued by Gloria in 1933 (G.C. 10703a and G.C. 10703b – see the illustration

in Figure 8). Copies of the latter are housed in the Kurt Weill Foundation. An orchestral arrangement by Karel Salomon, known as The Suite from *Der Silbersee*, also exists. It is approximately twenty-three minutes long and has been recorded on Vox/Turnabout (TV 34760) with the M.I.T. Symphony Orchestra conducted by David Epstein. It seems that this recording had some impact on the visibility of this work, which makes its relative neglect all the more surprising.

Leading up to *Der Silbersee* and ‘Die Neue Oper’

Der Silbersee may be seen as embodying some of the values of what Kurt Weill termed ‘Der Neue Oper’ (discussed in Chapter 4). In many ways this conjunction between Weill’s music and philosophy may be compared to Wagner. Weill indeed saw himself as an operatic reformer: ‘Ever since I made up my mind, at the age of 19, that my field of special activity would be the theatre, I have tried continuously to solve, in my own way, the form-problems of the musical theatre, and through the years I have approached these problems from all angles’ (quoted in Kowalke 1979: 40). Despite the analogy with Wagner, however, Weill, like his contemporaries, needed to move away from the German idealism of the late 19th –century, and especially to free himself from the inventor of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Mahler, Schoenberg, Berg, Krenek and Hindemith were, as Susan Cook puts it, ‘bored’ with Wagner, who had ‘become a symbol for many young composers of a moribund, hyper-emotional past which they wished to leave behind’ (1988: 10). According to Cook there was naturally some opposition to such young ‘radicals’, especially from those within the Wagner camp (which later included Hitler). A need for a new direction in opera had already been heralded by works such as Richard Strauss’s *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1909), and this direction continued with Stravinsky’s *The Soldier’s Tale* (1918), Berg’s *Wozzeck* (1925) and Krenek’s *Jonny spielt auf* (1927). These examples of new (if not very different) opera

were very successful, but the way they experimented with musical language and form (and the way they were received in some quarters) inevitably led to the conclusion that opera was in crisis.

During the ten years prior to the composition of *Der Silbersee*, Weill set himself an agenda for finding a new way of approaching music theatre. Works such as the children's pantomime *Zaubernacht* (1922), *Der Protagonist* (1926) – a one-act opera composed in collaboration with Georg Kaiser – and *Royal Palace* (1926) demonstrate his versatility and mastery in this field; less than half of this early *oeuvre* were in fact the result of collaborations with Brecht and reveal the composer's interest in a wide diversity of subject matter. In an essay entitled 'Topical Theatre',³ Weill himself clearly lists the dangers of a superficial approach towards writing music (see Kowalke 1979: 510). Jarman observes that 'Weill's main concerns were always social, humanistic and musical...' (1982: 133).

³ Weill's essays have been collected and translated by Kim Kowalke and printed in his book entitled *Kurt Weill in Europe* (see bibliography). A collection of the original essays, transcripts and articles written by Weill (as well as the many letters to his musical connections, publishers and wife Lotte Lenya) are preserved in the archives of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music in New York. As a South African, I have been able to view the website of this foundation (see bibliography for website address) but not to sample the documents stored there.

It should also be noted that Weill was already quite aware of the American musical vernacular as well as film music, and he draws on it quite frequently in some of his works of the 1920s. Some of them have English titles – such as *Royal Palace* (1925-26) and *Happy End* (1929) – and there are palpable ‘jazz’ and ‘American’ elements in *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren* (1927) as well as cabaret elements in *Mahagonny Songspiel* (1927). It is of course true that it was not only Weill who became interested in the American musical vernacular; elements of it can be found in many German stage works of the time, such as Krenek’s *Jonny spielt auf*.

Weill’s first ‘experimental’ opera, *Der Protagonist*, was premiered in Dresden in 1926 and made his name well known ‘beyond specialist circles...[it] was hailed by Oskar Bie and others as the first genuine operatic success achieved by a German post-war composer’ (Drew and Robinson 2001: 221). Weill was invited by Hindemith on the strength of *Der Protagonist* to write a short opera for his 1927 Baden-Baden Chamber Music Festival. The result was the *Mahagonny Songspiel*, as Weill and Brecht called it. Weill later turned this work into a full-length opera, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (The Rise and Fall of the City Mahagonny). It remains one of his best known works.

Each year following, up to 1932, there was another operatic or musical success. All this time, Weill was developing the ideas he held regarding ‘new’ opera, which would culminate in *Der Silbersee*. Development is an interesting notion with Weill: his musical style is always eclectic because he draws on such a variety of genres (cabaret, opera, jazz, operetta, symphony, chamber music, dance music). *Der Silbersee*, for example, opens with a Beethovenian funeral dirge, shortly thereafter comes a neo-impressionistic tango. This very eclecticism, however, is itself unique to Weill: within all his stage works there is a rich fabric of harmony, form and style, all serving to heighten the drama. For it is clear from Weill’s essays that certain musical responses could not be helped; that the only correct response was to underpin the text, which contained the dramatic potential of the

work. The key to the differences between his works, then, lies in the ways he responded to different libretti.

Kurt Weill was in fact extremely careful in his choice of texts and librettists. In Germany he collaborated only with Georg Kaiser, Bertolt Brecht, Erik Hauptman, Iwan Goll and Caspar Neher. Only once did he write his own text, namely for *Berlin in Licht-Song* (Slow-Fox), commissioned by the 'Berlin im Licht' Festival, and was premiered on 15 October 1928. After a somewhat stifling collaboration with Brecht,⁶ Weill chose to work with Kaiser, with whom he had successfully collaborated on *Der Protagonist* (1926) and *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren* (1927). It seems that Kaiser was never as dictatorial in his approach as Brecht had been, so this collaboration afforded the artistic independence that Weill was seeking at this point. It has been documented that from 1930 Weill was reluctant to work with Brecht, as he felt that the latter had become too political and too extreme in his Marxism. Brecht and Weill had also come to blows over the production of *Aufstieg*. Although the collaboration between the two had been formative and highly creative in the 20s, and their personal relationship amicable, Weill seems to have needed to move on. *Der Silbersee* still has some Brechtian influences, but it is obviously an example of a new direction, towards a more distinct 'Weill-style' (Kowalke 1979: 299).

⁶ 'Now that Weill's essays have surfaced, longstanding hypotheses concerning the nature of the collaboration must be re-examined. The persistent and now untenable view that Brecht was always the dominant partner, retaining full authority and serving as "the guiding force in matters of musical tone and expression" (112) is easily dismissed...Lenya recalls that Weill at least pretended to be "co-operative" in that sense: "Brecht and Kurt had the most enormous respect for each other's opinions, though the relationship never deepened into a strong friendship (as it did between Kurt and Georg Kaiser, and later between Kurt and Maxwell Anderson). Sometimes Brecht impressed on Kurt his own ideas for a song, picking out chords on his guitar. Kurt noted these ideas with his grave little smile and invariably said yes, he would try to work them in when he got back to Hassforth's' (Kowalke 1979: 147).

Der Silbersee and Nazi Germany

Historically, *Der Silbersee* makes for fascinating study, as I found from both a performance and a musicological perspective. Its creation and première in the early 1930s were fraught with political controversy, and even led to rioting; not surprisingly, given the state of Germany in those years. ‘The Weimar Republic: the words conjure up images of a reckless age, Berlin nightlife, decadence, artistic experimentation, economic instability, a failed democracy, and the rise of fascism’ (Cook 1988:1). Amid the downfall of the administration, Nazi ideals were easy to foster, and (as is well known) Weill, a Jew with leftist political sympathies,⁷ became an obvious target for the increasingly virulent anti-Semitism of the late 20s and early 30s. The premiere of *Aufstieg und fall der Stadt Mahagonny* in Leipzig in 1930 turned into a riot-torn event and became the prelude to a campaign to rid the stage and state of his works:

The first performance of *the Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* took place in Leipzig on 9 March 1930. Hans Heinsheimer was in Leipzig for the dress rehearsal on 8 March and was already conscious of ‘a strange and unknown tension’ in the theatre. Worried by the tense atmosphere Heinsheimer went to Brecher, the conductor, and warned him, ‘I have the feeling that we are playing this opera on a powder keg’. Brecher is reported to have said that, as a musician, his interest was in the score: he knew nothing about politics. On the night of the première Heinsheimer saw: ‘crowds of Brown Shirts on the streets (there had already been rumours that the Nazis had bought whole blocks of seats) and the square and the opera house were full of them. They carried banners and placards protesting the new work by Weill and Brecht. People on the streets, people in uniform, were protesting against an opera before it was performed.’

⁷ Kurt Weill’s ‘affiliation with the *Novembergruppe* provided a similar stimulus for questioning presumptions about German art. The *Novembergruppe* began in December of 1918 and took its name from the month in which the German revolution took place. Initially the group consisted of artists dedicated to creating new art for the German citizenry. To this end they sought to revolutionise schooling, museum management, public exhibitions, and to redefine the nature of art, preaching “the art of the people and the people, through handicrafts, to art. Founding members of the *Novembergruppe* included architect Erich Mendelsohn and artists Max Pechstein and Wieland Schmidt, who were also associated with *Neue Sachlichkeit*, a broader artistic trend ... Weill joined the loosely knit artistic collective in 1922 ... Stuckenschmidt noted that the composers who belonged did not share a common musical style, but rather held a common artistic ideology’ (Cook 1988: 17-18).

The first performance began:

it was not long before demonstrations broke out in the auditorium ... a little uneasiness at first, a signal perhaps, then noise, shouts, at last screams and roars of protest ... Some of the actors couldn't stand it any more. They stepped out of their parts, rushed to the rim of the stage and shouted their protests against the intruders (Jarman 1982: 57-58).

It seems that the fiasco continued and, by the end of the work, what had started out as murmurings, had developed into a 'full-scale riot'. Lotte Lenya who was in the audience at the time described the incident:

By the time the last scene was reached, fist fights had broken out in the aisles, the theatre was a screaming mass of people; soon the riot spread to the stage, panicky spectators were trying to claw their way out and only the arrival of a large police force finally cleared the theatre. The second performance took place with the house lights up and the theatre walls lined with police ... *Mahagonny* had become the target of a campaign designed to drive it off the stage (Jarman 1982: 58).

Opera houses that previously staged his works would no longer do so, and the *Krolloper*, which had been associated with the production of new works, closed its doors in July of 1931.

Economic reasons were cited, 'many critics who supported Klemperer's attempted operatic renewal' in the staging of works such as Kurt Weill's operas 'maintained along with Klemperer that the closing was due to political pressure. Conservative critics and government officials claimed Klemperer's productions were leftist, if not communist-inspired, and thus smacked of *Kulturbolschewismus*'⁸ (Cook 1988: 3). The work *Die Bürgschaft* (1930-32), one of Weill's most acclaimed and musically ambitious to date – it was a full-length opera with a full-scale orchestra – was shunned by most theatres.

Thus, the staging of *Der Silbersee*, Weill realized, would be extremely difficult. He and Kaiser therefore decided to take the extraordinary step of premiering the work in three different German cities on the same evening: 18 February 1933. It was produced at

⁸ *Kulturbolschewismus* was a term coined by the Nazis to describe any artistic work, which was not acceptable to them as it contained in their opinion leftist political assertions. The term was loosely applied to works of composers, artists or writers whom they did not like.

Leipzig, Magdeburg and Erfurt with three casts, in order to be seen by as many people as possible before its anticipated banning.

On my insistence, negotiations have also now been resumed with Leipzig, with the result that Leipzig will put on *Der Silbersee* on 18 February. In fact Leipzig wanted it already for 28 January, but we then purposely asked for a later date so as to have time to secure other theatres for a simultaneous première. That is the most important task ... That is to say, objections raised to the text ... can be immediately dispelled (quoted in Heinzelmann 1990: 25).

Significantly, the work was staged less than three weeks after Hitler had come to power. Weill and Kaiser who were both 'already marked as Jews, chose to unleash a work which preached compassion and humanity whilst satirising both the injustice of market forces and the corrupt decadence of the old regime' (Bremmer 2001: 5). The work struck home, for on that first night, as Lotte Lenya recalled fifty years later, '[a]s if this weren't enough, Fennimore's 'Ballad of Caesar's Death' ("he who lives by the sword will die by the sword") stunned the audience, for whom the association with Hitler struck a chilling chord ... [A]s the ballad ended there was an ominous, icy silence, no-one dared look at his neighbour' (Lenya, quoted in Bremmer 2001: 5). Weill's publisher, Universal Edition, feared that the Nazis would prevent the performances. As Heinsheimer put it in a letter to Weill:

I cannot share your view that the new order in Germany can be only a nightmare of a few months. I am filled with the deepest pessimism because I believe the underestimation of our opponents is only now being avenged, and that everything will now come to be considered better, safer and more single-minded than what the Republicans have held dear for 15 years. How, in the concrete case, will this situation now affect *Silbersee*? In my opinion, a withdrawal now, perhaps a postponement of the première after the elections is useless (quoted in Heinzelmann 1990: 26).

The Nazis did indeed create havoc at these performances and further performances of the work were banned, despite the public's warm reception of it. There were in fact to be wider repercussions for art under Nazism in the coming days, leading to more stringent censorship and emergency decrees. In a letter dated 24 February 1932, a week after the letter quoted above, Heinsheimer wrote to Weill:

These protests will naturally be through all the papers, and it seems to me more than doubtful whether there will be so many Intendants who, like Goetz, will risk such affairs...It's enough to make one sick! ... [W]e need not delude ourselves: fine as was the Leipzig success, the situation is just as serious as we have sensed and felt the whole time. That this innocuous piece was so effectively attacked in Magdeburg was not on account of the thing itself but of you personally ... (quoted in Heinzelmann 1990: 26).

The censorship and the Reichstag fire a week later sealed Weill's fate in Germany and he was forced to flee. It has since emerged that, as Heinsheimer suspected, Weill was in grave personal danger –his name was on Hitler's infamous artists' 'black list' – and it was out of fear for his life that he left Germany secretly in March 1933 (his biography is covered in greater detail in Chapter 2).

The fact that *Der Silbersee* was written in Germany by a Jew under Fascism makes it an interesting survival as a political work. It will always be 'relevant' at the political level, and although the music is of its time, the message of the work as a whole is timeless.

CHAPTER 2

Kurt Weill: A Brief Biography

In order to establish the significance of Weill's musical and theoretical beliefs (which may be found in his writings), and their intimate connection to his musical output, it is essential to take a brief look at the events of his life. These events, it can be argued, either helped establish or destroy his musical style. In light of the dichotomy (discussed earlier) between the German and American works, it is useful to look at some of Weill's biographical details, where they not only show the unfolding of an extraordinary musical career but also establish the reasons for his apparent 'about face'. They also help to provide a background for discussion of Weill's theatrical stance on opera.

The Foundations

Kurt Julian Weill was born into a Jewish musical family in Dessau, a town in northern Germany, on the 2 March 1900. Weill's father, Albert, was the chief cantor at the Dessau synagogue from 1899-1919. He was himself a musician, although his compositions were mainly liturgical settings and sacred motets. According to David Drew, who has written extensively on Weill, the family hailed from the South (Baden), and were able to trace their origins back to the thirteenth century (Drew 1987: 53).

Kurt was the third of four children born to Emma and Albert Weill. According to Drew and Robertson's biography in *New Groves II* (2001), Albert Weill was very interested in his children's musical education and he encouraged his children musically. They were, for example, taken regularly to the opera from a young age. The repertoire of the Hoftheater, where Weill would have been regularly taken, 'despite its strong Wagnerian emphasis [was] broad enough to provide the young Weill with a wide range of music-theatrical experiences which were supplemented by the orchestra's subscription concerts and by much domestic music-making' (Drew and Robertson 2001: 221). It was from

these regular visits to the theatre that Weill developed a fondness and passion for the musical stage.

Weill showed an early interest in musical composition. His father, recognizing that his son had some musical ability was anxious to help him develop his music writing talent. Thus, in 1915, at the age of 15, Albert Weill brought Kurt to the attention of Albert Bing, the assistant conductor at the Hoftheater who had, according to Drew, studied conducting with Arthur Nikisch and composition with Hans Pfitzner (Drew 1987: 53). Bing was impressed with the young Weill and taught him for the next three years. It was Bing and his sister (married to the expressionist playwright Carl Sternheim) who introduced Weill to the sophistication of the theatre in the form of expressionism. Later, according to Drew, they were to become close family friends of the Weills. In 1917 Weill began volunteer work as coach at the opera, a position Bing had found for him.

A Start to a Successful Career

In April 1918 Weill enrolled at the Berlin Musikhochschule:

Weill appears to have been an outstandingly successful student during his period at the Hochschule and not only composed a symphonic poem (based on Rilke's *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke*) which was thought good enough to be performed by the Hochschule orchestra, but also succeeded in winning a bursary offered by the Felix Mendelssohn Foundation. However, despite this success, Weill was disillusioned by the Hochschule and by what he regarded as its 'unsympathetic atmosphere' and left only after one year (Jarman 1982: 14).

He felt, however, that the 'atmosphere of the place was too stifling' (Drew and Robertson 2001: 221). Thus, he applied to Schoenberg, to study privately with him in Vienna. Due to financial constraints, Weill was forced to return to Germany in the summer of 1919 where he worked under Knappertsbusch and Bing for three months at the Hoftheater. He then undertook a post as conductor of a tiny municipal opera company in Lüdenscheid. Weill remained with this company until the summer of 1920, when the announcement came that Busoni had been invited to direct a master class in composition at the

Akademie der Künste in Berlin. Weill was encouraged to apply for membership and was accepted for a three-year period, which began in 1921.

Busoni regarded Weill's talent with much admiration. He felt, however, that Weill did have some technical shortcomings and it was thus that he referred Weill to one of his 'disciples', Philipp Jarnach, for extra training in counterpoint:

He called us disciples and there were no actual lessons, but he allowed us to breathe his aura, which emanated in every sphere, but eventually manifested itself in music ... It was a mutual exchange of ideas in the very best sense, with no attempt to force an opinion, no autocracy, and not the slightest sign of envy or malice; and any piece of work that revealed talent and ability was immediately recognized and enthusiastically received (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 24).

Under the supervision of Busoni and Jarnach, Weill developed rapidly. In the summer of 1922, they encouraged Weill to provide a score for a ballet-pantomime entitled *Die Zaubernacht*, which was very successfully staged in Berlin in 1922. This work 'proved to be a momentous event in his career' (Kowalke 1979: 29) and as a result Weill came to the attention of the German expressionist playwright Georg Kaiser with whom he was to work with on *Der Silbersee*. It was also as the result of auditions that were held for dancers for this production of *Zaubernacht*, that Weill was to see Lotte Lenya, the woman he eventually married in 1926:

My first audition was for a children's ballet, *Die Zaubernacht*, and though I was hired, my teacher, who had applied as director was not. Out of loyalty I refused the part. Incidentally the composer of that work was Kurt Weill. He was in the orchestra pit and saw me- I did not see [him] ... [O]ur meeting was to come some years later (Kowalke 1979: 29).

Musically, Weill considered *Die Zaubernacht* as his first mature score and the first work 'in which the simple style can be recognized'; it also taught him much about the stage:

I wrote the pantomime *Die Zaubernacht* for a Russian troupe at the Theatre am Kurfürstendamm. I learned two things from the concentrated intensity of Russian theatrical art: that the stage has its own musical form whose confirmation grows organically from the flow of the action and that significant events can be expressed scenically only by the simplest, most inconspicuous means. An orchestra of nine men, a singer, two dancers, and a number of children; that was the apparatus of this danced dream (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 27).

According to Hans Strobel, the work which was never published and, which has only survived as a piano reduction, was:

Extraordinarily free flowing, lively, delicate in its treatment of timbre in the small orchestra...this work, certainly not weighty or dramatic, is of the highest significance for its developmental value. For here the transformed attitude toward the theatre is documented for the first time. For Busoni's students, the connection between scene and music could occur only on the basis of the play. The specific development was the liberation from the colouristic and intellectual elements that ultimately made absolute musical composition impossible in the late-Romantic period. It was liberation from any ties to music drama, which had gradually destroyed every spontaneous outgrowth of music in the theatre and which had brought music into total bondage to the texts that were sketched according to purely literary principles (Strobel quoted in Kowalke 1979: 27-28).

This work which created 'a great stir' in Germany (Ibid.), was presented in New York three years later.

It is evident that Weill's excellent musical education up to this point – at the Berlin Hochschule, studying with Schoenberg (himself rapidly becoming well known), his studies at Dessau under Bing, his conductorship in Lüdenscheid, and his studies with Busoni his studies with Schoenberg (who was by this time himself, becoming a well recognized composer of substance in Germany) as well – all convinced him that his calling was indeed that of a composer. Above all he had gained valuable practical experience in the theatre.

At this time Weill was writing many works. Even before beginning his studies with Busoni, he had already completed a third opera as well as having written a string quartet in B minor, and a sonata for cello and piano. Weill admitted that his time particularly at the small municipal theatre in Lüdenscheid, where, because of the theatres small budget, he had to coach singers, conduct performances, direct scenes of dialogue, reduce instrumentation and re-orchestrate orchestral passages 'to fit the constitution' of the theatre's orchestra, it had afforded him much valuable experience and training. It 'represented a specific, theatrical participation and training as distinguished from deadly

abstract study' (Kowalke 1979: 21). Weill's career was then certain to move into the theatrical field and as Berlin was experiencing an 'artistic boom' (Kowalke 1979: 22), he relocated there in September 1920.

According to Drew, it was also during this time that Weill began writing concert works for orchestra and in the 1922/23 seasons, four concert works, two of which became well known, namely the *Sinfonia Sacra Op. 6* and the *Divertimento Op. 5*, which were premiered by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. At the end of this period of vital development, Busoni recommended Weill to the publishers Universal Edition in Vienna. This would prove to be a very productive relationship as Universal Edition was to become Weill's sole publisher for the next ten years. *Der Silbersee* would be one of Weill's last works to be published by Universal Edition, in 1933.

Opera: The Beginnings

Busoni died in 1924. Shortly before Busoni's death, Weill made the acquaintance of Georg Kaiser. This was to be a convenient and close relationship for ten years that would give rise to three of Weill's musical stage works, *Der Silbersee* being one of them. The first product of the collaboration between Weill and Kaiser was the successful premiere of the opera *Der Protagonist* in 1926. This opera was a vital building block in the career of Weill as it launched him beyond 'specialist circles' into the larger world of opera and musical theatre, where his achievement was recognized by Oskar Bie and others as significant:

Kurt Weill's music breaks essentially a new path, dominated completely by the melodic element. His score aims at neither programmatic depiction nor characterization through use of leitmotifs; it is entirely devoted to the provisos of the larger issues of the drama. The drama and music meet in the only possible way on the magical level of essential content. The result is the synthesis of lasting significance for both play and music (Kowalke 1979: 45).

The collaboration with Brecht for *Mahagonny-Songspiel* in Baden-Baden in 1927 was to become 'one of the most important collaborations of the twentieth - century' (Drew and Robertson 2001: 221). It would result in the premiere of works such as *Die*

Dreigroschenoper (1928), *Happy End* (1929) and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (1930) in Germany. The collaboration between Weill and Kaiser was an equally productive one.

A few months before the premiere of *Die Dreigroschenoper* in 1929, Weill and Kaiser launched their latest collaboration, *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren* in 1928. This proved to be a very successful one-act opera buffa. The critical reception of the work was favourable and in a critique written after the premiere, Adolf Albers reported glowingly:

When Kurt Weill's *Der Protagonist* was staged a few years ago in Dresden with absolutely extraordinary success, one knew that impressive things were still to be expected from this young music dramatist. And one also recognized that only very seldom could so fortunate collaboration between a librettist and composer be recorded as the alliance of Kurt Weill with the refined theatrical technician, Georg Kaiser. Now this combination has proven itself for the second time. In an attempt to add a comic companion piece to *Der Protagonist*, the two artists have come together again, and the product of their union is the extremely effective, entertaining, and witty piece that the Leipzig Opera produced in an exceptionally brilliant performance (Kowalke 1979: 51).

The premiere of Weill's *Die Dreigroschenoper* went on to secure Weill the status of an international composer. It was on the back of this that he was finally able to devote himself completely to composition, since he was now financially secure.

This is not to say that during this period of prolific composition and success that Weill had no failures, only that they were unimportant to his developing style. Hugo

Leichtentritt wrote quite disparagingly of *Der Neue Orpheus* (1925):

Here Ivan Goll has parodied [sic], not without a certain humour, the struggle of the artist against the world. Weill has taken this cabaret number rather too seriously and has made of it a complicated piece of symphonic writing, with an orchestra à la Stravinsky, a toilsome and not very amusing affair, which passed without noticeable effect (Kowalke 1979: 46).

Hans Strobel described this work, as a 'scenic cantata' thus indicating its possibility for the stage. The opera *Royal Palace* (1925-26) described by The Associated Press:

'opera... brought wild applause and a few scattering hisses... [T]he opera, which might

be described as a blend of revue and classical opera' (Kowalke 1979: 46). Though firmly establishing Weill as an innovator, it was unfortunately premiered only a few weeks after Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf*, which had stunned the operatic world with its novel jazz sections and obvious topicality. Critics assumed that Weill's was the duplicate' (Kowalke 1979: 46). According to Kowalke, it seemed that the integration of dance idioms, which had the unique purpose of social commentary, were not even noticed as having served any purpose different to that of Krenek's use of Jazz. Again Leichtentritt:

Royal Palace confounds effect with affectation, and stands a good chance of winning first prize for the dullest opera book in existence...It is patently impossible to write worthwhile music to the ridiculous dialogue of this action...His talent is noticeable in the facility with which he treats the complicated apparatus, in the brilliancy and rhythmical vivacity of his dance music, and in moments of real expressiveness, alas, too short and too few give the impression of soulful music...For the most part Weill's score is cold (Kowalke 1979: 47).

The last real failure of this period, apart from his full-length opera *Die Bürgschaft* (1932), the failure of which Weill attributed to the 'catastrophic situation of the German theatre' (Heinzelmann 1990:22), was his 'musiquette' in two acts (as labelled by the June 1926 issue of *Die Musik*) entitled *Na und?* meaning 'Well?' or 'What about it?'. This work was described by Kowalke as never having 'moved out of dry dock, again primarily because of its faulty libretto' (Kowalke 1979: 49). The work was never completed or published due to its libretto, title and the possibility that it reflected 'the asphalt cynicism of Berlin' (Kowalke 1979: 49). At this point, Dr Heinsheimer of Universal Edition expressed a fear that this work 'would, at this point' in Weill's 'career, be a dangerous setback' (Kowalke 1979: 49).

Weill the 'Musical Activist'

In the years prior to the positive financial situation that he now found himself in, Weill, had been forced to take on pupils. He taught people such as Claudio Arrau, Nikos Skalkottas and Maurice Abravanel. He became a prolific contributor to the radio weekly

Der Deutsche Rundfunk,⁹ where he provided previews and reviews on a regular basis. This experience proved to be monumental in his development as a music critic and composer of musical works for the stage:

Undoubtedly Weill's initial motivation in writing for the German radio industry was to bolster his income, but the four-year tenure and the extent of his contributions indicate a genuine enthusiasm for radio as a medium for wider communications of music and theatre... Like many of the musicians associated with the November Group, Weill was concerned with building a wider, more "democratic" audience (Kowalke 1979: 44).

Many of these reviews and essays have been saved and are stored in the Kurt Weill Foundation's archives in New York. They have been translated and reproduced in Kim Kowalke's book *Kurt Weill in Europe* (1979). The letters of Weill to colleagues such as Caspar Nehuer and Dr. Heinsheimer of Universal Edition as well as the personal letters written between Weill and Lenya have been published in the book *Speak Low (When you speak Love): The Letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya*, edited by Symonette and Kowalke. These volumes contain the bulk of Weill's musical ideas regarding opera and theatre music in general.

A Target For Nazi Criticism

Weill was now able to devote his time solely to composition. But despite the fact that he was the most successful theatre composer to emerge in the Weimar Republic, by the early 1930s, he had become a target for Nazi criticism. Those with political influence began to drive his works from the subsidized theatres. Weill as Jew and 'musical activist' (evident from his association with the artists in the *Novembergruppe*) steadily became the target of the rising National Socialist Party. The Nazis were particularly opposed to the works of Jewish artists and many scores, books and works of art were confiscated and destroyed (see Figure 10 on p.122). As we saw in the Introduction, Weill's performances in many

⁹ Weill was employed as music and theatre critic (Berlin correspondent) of *Der deutsche Rundfunk*. This weekly radio journal was devoted to the technical, social and programmatic aspects of radio. It was established in 1923 and edited by Hans S.von Heister. The periodical listed the programmes of major German radio stations, in advance, on a weekly basis. It printed articles about the role of radio in society and art. It also published musical and theatrical reviews. Weill regularly contributed two to three essays to the weekly from 12 April 1925- 17 May 1929.

opera houses were subject to Nazi banning and riots. After the premiere of *Die Bürgschaft* (1932) and *Der Silbersee* (1933), Weill found himself in such a situation, these performances ended in rioting. Sadly, both these works were again successful in terms of the general public's reception of them but they were shunned by theatres who that felt producing them would endanger their future business, due to the political nature of the works and the Nazis strong disapproval of them.

After the premiere of *Die Bürgschaft*, the Nazi press, *Völkischer Beobachter* released this notice:

The State Opera intends to slap the German nation in the face in the first half of March by giving the premiere of a new opera, *Die Bürgschaft*, by Kurt Weill, the composer who has been shameless enough to offer the German people *The Threepenny Opera*, *The Rises and Fall of the City of Mahogany* and other inferior works that he has written. This Jew has yet to realize that the last named piece led to a riot in Leipzig and that his abominable and worthless *Threepenny Opera* is rejected everywhere. It is inconceivable that a composer who purveys such totally un-German pieces should again be given the chance to appear at a theatre which is supported by the German tax-payer's money. Let Israel find edification in Weill's new opera (Jarman 1982: 65).

Those opera houses who were prepared to stage the work in question quickly changed their plans, thus future performances of *Die Bürgschaft* never took place.

Despite – or perhaps because of – the political turmoil of this time, these works clearly demonstrate a significant shift in Weill's compositional style and they are possibly most closely related to what Weill envisaged as 'Die Neue Oper'. After the triple premiere of *Der Silbersee* in February 1933 in Leipzig, Magdeburg and Erfurt, the state applied emergency decrees and even more rigorous censorship. At the second performance of *Der Silbersee* in Magdeburg on the 21 February, the performance was interrupted by riots that were organized by the *Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur*. On the 27 February 1933, approximately one week after the second Magdeburg performance, the Reichstag fire broke out signalling 'Hitler's purge on his political opponents' (Jarman 1982: 67). In the upheaval which followed, Hitler announced the suspension of the Weimar constitution .A declaration followed announcing that 'for the protection of the people and the state [there

would be], lawful restriction on personal liberty, on rights of free expression of opinion including the freedom of the press, on the rights of assembly and associations' (Ibid.). In addition to these emergency decrees, Hitler declared that 'violations of the privacy of postal, telegraphic and telephonic communications, warrants for house searches and orders for confiscation as well as restriction of property were declared permissible beyond the legal limits otherwise prescribed' (Jarman 1982: 67).

Der Silbersee, which the Nazis blamed for stirring up trouble, put an end to Weill's possibilities for remaining in Germany. It was indeed very dangerous to those on the wrong side of 'The Jewish Question'. Many of these Jewish artists were on Hitler's 'Black List' (cf p. 14) and it is well documented now that many of these artists were either executed prior to the Holocaust or put to death in the Nazi concentration camps:

Learning that he was on the Nazi blacklist, and knowing many of his acquaintances had been arrested, Weill and his wife Lotte Lenya left Germany by car for France on 21 March 1933. On 10 May 1933, less than two months after Weill had left Germany, the works of Brecht and many other writers were publicly burned. Weill's publisher, Universal Edition, was based in Austria rather than Germany, and his scores therefore remained safe until 1938 when, immediately after the Anschluss, the offices of Universal Edition were raided by the Gestapo and many of the scores held there were destroyed (Jarman 1982: 67).

It seems that most of Weill's manuscripts survived this atrocity. However, apart from a few songs that were given to Lenya and George Davis when they left Germany (it is not clear if Lenya and Weill left together),¹⁰ a case of Weill's earlier manuscripts packed by his sister Ruth for shipment to Palestine in 1935 was lost when the case fell overboard.

Lastly, before the Nazi seizure of power, the musicologist Herbert Fleisher, who with Weill's permission was to make a study of Weill's significant early works, took the manuscripts with him to Italy. In Italy, staying in a hospice run by German nuns, he decided to get rid of the scores – perhaps out of fear. He posted the parcelled-up manuscripts to Berlin, to the German Branch of Universal Edition. According to Drew

¹⁰ In David Drew's account of the Weill's exile, Kurt Weill left Germany in a car driven by his friends Caspar and Erika Neher on the 21 March 1933. He notes that as Lenya and Weill were in the process of divorcing, and in order to allay Nazi suspicion, she left much later with her lover George Davis.

the package was never accounted for, because in fact, in 1954 when Fleischer decided to visit his pre-war refuge in Italy, he learnt that for twenty years, the German nuns had been ‘waiting to return to him a precious manuscript which he had left behind and which – shorn of its incriminating title page and epigraph – they had hidden away during the German occupation’ (Drew 1987: 11). The manuscript turned out to be Weill’s First Symphony.

Finally, understanding the real threat to his life, Weill fled Germany on 21 March 1933 as the Nazi’s were beginning to clamp down on those who tried to leave the country. Caspar and Erika Neher drove him across the German border by car so that his disappearance would not be noticed, and he fled to France. Weill left Germany with only a few belongings and the sketches of his Second Symphony.

Once in France, Weill was immediately commissioned to compose a score for *Les Ballets* 1933, and reluctantly renewed his collaboration with Bertolt Brecht, which had ended rather abruptly three years before. This resulted in the work *Die sieben Todsünden* (The seven deadly sins), choreographed by Balanchine and sung by Lenya.

Now, Weill began to accept that the political situation in Germany was no temporary aberration (the suspension of his contract with Universal Edition was an indication), and it seemed that his position was not really secure in France either:

Weill worked steadily during his two-year stay in Paris ... he enjoyed no sustained success. Nor had he been successful in escaping blatant anti-Semitic propaganda in Paris. That German music journals systematically attempted to denigrate such “smutty cabaret talents as Weill” is not surprising, but even in France at a performance of Weill’s “Ballade de César”, Florent Schmitt arose and shouted: “We have enough bad musicians in France already, without having to import German-Jewish ones” (Kowalke 1979: 88).

Shocked by hearing of Florent Schmitt’s outburst and a pro-Nazi demonstration against him in 1934, after a concert performance of *Der Silbersee* in Paris, Weill withdrew from public attention to the village of Louveciennes where he turned his attention to writing for the commercial theatres of Paris, London and Zurich. The works which followed were *Marie gallant* (1934) and *Der Kuhhandel* (1934). Both were failures.

Weill's disappointment was somewhat alleviated by his new collaboration with Max Reinhardt and Franz Werfel, which began in the summer of 1934 (he was to work with Reinhardt and Werfel for 18 months). The result of this collaboration was a historical spectacle of the Jewish people, from the time of Abraham to the destruction of Solomon's temple. It was originally set in German and called *Der Weg der Verheissung*. It was planned for December 1935, where it would be staged in New York, as *The Eternal Road* (1936-37). Weill was invited to conduct the first performance of the work and thus in preparation Weill and Lenya (who were now reunited) sailed for New York. They arrived on 10 September 1935. By December, having already made significant connections in the American theatre world, the Weills decided to take up permanent residence in the United States of America. He began almost immediately to write works for the American stage.

Weill in America: The Swan-song to a Brilliant Career

He was asked by the Group Theatre to collaborate with the American playwright, Paul Green, on an anti-war musical play called *Jonny Johnson*. This work was staged in New York in November of 1936, a few weeks before the eventual and overdue premiere of *The Eternal Road*. Both works earned Weill the support that he needed. Financially, however, they were failures. However, Weill, realizing that he could never return to Germany, that a war may be imminent and that, as a Jew, his life would be in danger, applied for American citizenship in May 1937. Other German refugees such as Arnold Schoenberg, Theodor Adorno and Bertolt Brecht had also relocated to the United States in order to escape the Nazi persecution of Jews.

As *Der Silbersee* appeared in the middle of this gap, it is important to dwell for a moment on the significance of Weill's move from Germany to the United States, as the works composed in Germany from 1920-1933 and the few works composed in France from 1934 until Weill's move to the United States in September 1935 were never performed in America. In this transitional period Weill turned his attention to composing works which though drawing on his musical experience gained from the works of his German or

European period, were essentially different in subject matter and even musically different. For instance, his well-known American opera *Down in The Valley* is harmonically more triadic, less dissonant, lacking the trademarks of the German works which are found in *The Threepenny Opera*, for example. As discussed earlier, this may be understood as Weill's desire to write works which spoke directly to the audience, as *Der Silbersee* did:

It is easy to overlook, or ignore, how consistent and how brave, given the cultural context, were Weill's attempts to retain his integrity. The tenacity with which he continued, in these American works, to pursue his life-long musical, social and humanistic beliefs gives the lie to the idea that the American Weill betrayed the ideals which he had promoted in his earlier European works. Weill's belief in the necessity for a new form of opera never changed; nor his belief that this new opera should reach a new public. Only his ideas about the way in which these ends were to be achieved had undergone a transformation (Jarman 1982: 37).

Thus, it may be argued that these European works namely, *Der Silbersee*, may be viewed as important in the development of these American works.

After struggling on his own, he strengthened his ties with Broadway. In a statement made by him in 1937 before the production of his first Broadway musical Weill declared:

If there will ever be anything like an American opera, it is bound to come out of Broadway. To start a new movement of American musical theatre, you cannot go to the Metropolitan. They haven't got the audience. Broadway represents the living theatre in this country and American opera, as I imagine it, should be part of the living theatre (Jarman 1982: 136).

Weill had many Broadway successes, including, *Lady in the Dark* (1940) and *One Touch of Venus* (1943) which was eventually turned into a film. However, *The Firebrand of Florence* (1944) was a less successful operetta based on the memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini. According to Charles Hamm, '*Firebrand* is the most 'European' of Weill's pieces written in the United States, and in fact it differs little in general style from his previous operetta, *Kuhhandel/Kingdom*, written before he had set foot on American soil' (Hamm 2004: 240). Hamm attributes the demise of the operetta to the following factors:

The year 1945, when the attention of most Americans was focused on deadly military struggles in Europe and the Pacific, was hardly a propitious moment for a

‘most frothy and cleaver operetta that even pokes fun at the conventions of operetta themselves’...American audiences and critics were excited by new shows such as *Oklahoma!* (1943), *On the Town* (1944), and *Carousel* (1945), which had American settings and were finding new ways of integrating the elements of popular musical theatre (Hamm 2004: 242-243).

Weill's bold new American opera *Street Scene* (1946) based on Elmer Rice's award-winning drama, was followed in 1947-48 with an innovative vaudeville called *Love Life* , and *Lost in The Stars* (1949), a political and social critique of South African society and a musical based on the South African Alan Paton's novel *Cry The Beloved Country* (which has since been performed in South Africa at the Roodeport City Opera in 1996). Amongst these works was a war effort film musical called *Where Do We Go From Here?* (1943-44). During this time Weill wrote only one 'serious' opera for the non-Broadway stage. It was a college opera called *Down in the Valley* (1945-46) which would surpass the success of his other American works as its run had to be extended beyond that of any of his Broadway musicals. During the last few weeks of Weill's life, he began a project on which he would collaborate with Alan J. Lerner. He also began work on a musical adaptation of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* with Maxwell Anderson. These projects remain unfinished as the strain of his workload overcame him and he died very suddenly from heart trouble on 3 April 1950 at the young age of 50.

Weill's musical career was an extraordinary one, fraught with difficulties and re-adjustments. He lived in an era of immense change and contributed to musical change in no small way. His works are stamped with the ideals of 'new opera' and yet are able to cross over into the Hollywood musical. In the midst of such a rich career, at the time of greatest crisis, stands the work in question: *Der Silbersee*.

CHAPTER 3

Opera in Crisis?

The broader framing of this chapter turns on social, industrial and economic factors that influenced cultural development in Germany in the early part of the 20th century. First, however, I look at changes in the ideological conception of opera in this time period, and Weill's response to and participation in these changes. The views of his predecessors and contemporaries will be examined, thus providing the context for his own thoughts contained in his many essays written on the subject. My aim is thus to show how Weill moved towards his conceptualisation of what he termed 'Die Neue Oper' (The New Opera), and of which *Der Silbersee* is a prototype. I also contend that *Der Silbersee* may be classified within the *Singspiel* genre as Mozart employed it in *Die Zauberflöte*, rather than as a 'play with music'¹¹ (See Kemp in Kowalke 1986: 131).

Weill himself observed: "[T]his is in no sense an opera but a play with well integrated musical numbers, rather in the style of a Singspiel" (quoted in Heinzelmann 1990: 22). Although the work cannot be regarded as melodrama or grand opera in the late 19th-century sense, the music 'incorporates the recitatives, polyphonic choruses, heroic vocal style, and elaborate instrumentation characteristic of Weill's operas along with the simpler vocal style of the *Songs* typical of his "plays with music" (Kowalke 1979: 299). If it had been designated a dialogue-opera, as Kowalke points out, 'no government-subsidized opera house would have been permitted to mount it in 1933' (Ibid.). Although *Der Silbersee* cannot be considered as either operetta or cabaret, elements of both genres are present. In fact, the reason for Weill calling the piece a 'play with music' might have

¹¹In his correspondence with his publishers at Universal Edition, Weill insisted that *Der Silbersee* would be a 'play with music' rather than an opera (Heinzelmann 1990: 22). It is strange that Weill would have so fervently defended this work as a 'play with music' when from studying the score and recording of the work it can be categorised as operatic. It is certainly more than a mere 'play with music'. One could contend that the work fits the criteria of a *Singspiel* as Weill himself stated (Ibid.). Thus, in my opinion, due to the difficulties regarding performances and staging which Weill was experiencing at this time, and the recent failure of *Die Burgschaft*, meant, that cleverly categorising the work as a 'play with music' would perhaps secure its future on the stage (or at least an opening night) as well as its publication. Thus in so doing, it might also 'on the highest level [ensure] any risk to [his] name' (Ibid.).

been precisely so that it could be staged in a state opera house. Also to be noted is the fact that, in proposing this new project, Weill did not suggest Bertolt Brecht as a collaborator. Heinzelmann suggests that this was because he had ceased to respond to 'Brecht's mordant, pessimistic, almost apocalyptic analysis of society...and particularly to that expectation of salvation in Marxist ideology...' (1990: 18).

Disappointed by the 'failure' of *Die Bürgschaft*, essentially a political satire and his only full-length opera to date, Weill was considering a work for the Christmas of 1932. He attributed this failure to political turmoil:

Die Bürgschaft was begun in August 1930 and completed some fourteen months later in October 1931. During these fourteen months, however, the political situation in Germany had become even more dangerous. In the elections of September 1930 the Nazis, who had held a mere twelve seats in the previous Reichstag, won 170 seats. The Nazi vote had risen from 810,000 to six-and-a-half million and they now became the second largest party in the Reichstag. The new parliament opened on 13 October 1930 with Nazi demonstrations inside, and with riots and parades outside the Reichstag buildings. Throughout the following fifteen months the Nazis kept up an unceasing campaign of propaganda and violent activity in the streets. In 1931 the editor of *Die Weltbühne*, the main voice of the left wing, was arrested. S.A violence at showings of the American film *All quiet on the Western Front* forced the government to ban the film on the grounds that it 'endangered Germany's national prestige' (Jarman 1982: 63).

According to the British Ambassador to Berlin in July 1931, 'an un-natural silence' [hung] 'over the city... an atmosphere of extreme tension similar to that which I observed in Berlin in the critical days immediately before the war' (Jarman 1982: 63).

Nevertheless, Weill was considering negotiations with Eric Charrell, a successful producer and, he wanted to write a 'popular opera' (Heinzelmann 1990: 18). Weill initially had Kaiser's *The Jewish Widow* in mind. Kaiser and Weill met in July 1932 to discuss the new project, whereupon Kaiser expressed a desire to create a 'musical popular play' (Ibid.). Kaiser showed Weill his ideas for *Der Silbersee* and Weill was both moved and inspired by the text. Weill wrote to his publishers on the 29 July:

Meanwhile a very good plan has developed from the conversation that I had with Georg Kaiser about the Charrell project. Kaiser wants to write a musical popular play with me. He has a very fine, genuinely Kaiserish idea for it... In the last week I have worked daily with Kaiser and we have completed a draft of a very fine

play, a kind of modern fairy-tale...a brilliantly constructed, exciting piece (Heinzelmann 1990: 19).

It seems that Weill did not feel that the political tension in Berlin posed any real threat to this new project, let alone himself. Although later warned by Dr. Heinsheimer of Universal Edition that the work could indeed injure him, the pair decided to 'leave its course to fate' (Heinzelmann 1990: 26).

From the beginning, Weill realised that he was engaging on a 'piece that span[ned] categories' (Heinzelmann 1990: 22). He also set himself the goal of going 'beyond the type created in *Die Dreigroschenoper*' (Ibid.). He explained what he had in mind as follows:

It is in no way to be an opera but a piece that spans categories. I reserve the right whether to make of it a "play with music", that is, with quite simple songs which could be sung by straight actors, or to set about it making greater musical demands and write music of the extent and degree of difficulty of a piece of Offenbach light music. The latter would attract me more, because I could here go beyond the type created in *Die Dreigroschenoper* (Ibid.).

This observation is enlightening because it indicates the complexity of the challenges that Weill had set himself. It is quite clear from listening to, studying and performing the work that the music is demanding; it is not just incidental music to a play. The songs require trained opera singers who also have acting experience, and actors who must be classically trained singers. The orchestral score is challenging and written for a fair-sized and competent orchestra; thus it requires the expertise of a good conductor. The chorus, too, must be composed of fairly musically-minded singers. Thus the cast, at any rate, points to an operatic work.

After requests that he should cut certain numbers or sections of the dialogue because the work was too operatic, Weill retorted that

This is in no sense an opera but a play with well integrated musical numbers, rather in the style of a *Singspiel*. There are ideas in it that are among the most attractive that Kaiser has ever produced. As I have the intention of slipping in some smaller, less demanding works for practical theatre use before my next big

opera, here is the opportunity to carry this out on the highest level and without any risk to my name (Heinzelmann 1990: 22).

In a further letter defending the work, Weill writes:

We are certainly not dealing with an operetta, in which the instrumentation does not matter, but with a full-blown, very carefully considered score. The work is intended for the chief conductor in all theatres...in the case of *Der Silbersee* I am, with the utmost intent, further pursuing the path of writing worthwhile, carefully crafted music to a theatrical play (Heinzelmann 1990: 24).

There is little doubt that Weill was thinking on an operatic scale, even if for strategic reasons he termed *Der Silbersee* a 'play with music'. On a Gloria disc recorded on its opening night in Magdeburg (two songs are sung by Ernst Busch and conducted by Maurice de Abravanel), the work is classified as an 'operatic play', but this appellation is not entirely satisfactory either. It is thus almost impossible to define as a particular genre. As it is the last of his German works, it reflects what Kowalke has termed 'a synthesis' of his 'mature style' (1979: 299), and also in that it embodies his desire to go beyond works such as *Dreigroschenoper*, I propose that *Der Silbersee* be considered as an example of what Weill termed 'Die Neue Oper'. It was of course also written at a time of political turmoil and has a strong political subtext; as such it could also be regarded as a 'protest opera'.

Weill's concept of 'Die Neue Oper' (The New Opera) very much reflects his responses to contemporary socio-political and technical factors. Weill believed passionately that opera could no longer afford 'to express floating atmosphere or nervously exaggerated sentiments' (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 465), and that it should be grounded in 'the powerful emotional complexes of our era' (Ibid). *Der Silbersee* represents not only a protest against what was happening in Germany, it represents a protest against the operatic conventions of the past. Weill sums up the conditions of opera in his time thus:

Two works for the musical theatre of our era-the most significant and typical representatives of contrasting views-can already be appraised as results: Alban Berg's *Wozzek* is the grandiose conclusion to a development which, based throughout on Wagner and leading beyond French Impressionism and the naturalistic background of *Elektra* to Schoenberg's tone-colour melody [*Klangfarbenmelodie*], here arrives at its zenith in a masterpiece of the strongest

power. On the other side is Busoni's *Doktor Faust*, which can become the starting point for the formation of a new golden age of "opera" (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 465-466).

Der Silbersee thus identifies closely with 'opera in transition', as is evident in its use of the text and also the intensification of both music and drama (I discuss these issues in Chapters 4 and 5). Weill also challenges the conventions of opera writing, particularly in his use of song, dialogue, melodrama and instrumental numbers. In these dimensions Weill gives expression to the ideals of his contemporaries, as well as substance to his concept of 'new opera'.

Like *Mahagonny*, *Dreigroschenoper* and *Die Bürgschaft*, *Der Silbersee* also challenges the increasingly totalitarian nature of German society, as well as capitalism and corruption; as such it is a strong example of 'protest opera'. In fact, as a committed satire of contemporary Germany, *Der Silbersee* was treading on dangerous ground. Referred to symbolically as the 'land of Cockaigne' and a 'fools' paradise', Weill and Kaiser's view of Germany was damning. It commented on the threat of fascism, and went as far as ridiculing Hitler and his Nazi Party. In return their theatre work earned them the appellation of 'degenerate music' from its political detractors. Ironically, Weill did not yet foresee events that were so soon to become reality: the persecution and later extermination of Jews, the rallying of the whole world in the Second World War. But the words of Frau Luber (a caricature of Hitler) are ambiguous:

He who allows himself time and uses time establishes the old order. What does he change who says that now is a turning-point in time? He does not yet know the rules of Cockaigne. The small disturbance changes nothing: the wheel of time, which below presses one flat, sweeps on and stands still again: the old grandeur reigns over everything. Thus all the world's conflagrations are outlasted by the eternal land of Cockaigne, the eternal fools' paradise (Salter 1989: 68).

The protest aspect of the work combines new musical ideas with a heavily ironic libretto, as for example in von Luber and Baron Laur's 'triumphant' duet in Act 3, Scene 4. The message of man's universal plight, and the music which conveys this, transcends the conventions of nineteenth-century music. Weill and Kaiser achieve this by remaining true

to what Weill called the ‘goal of today’s theatre’ – the representation of human behaviour:

For ultimately what moves us in the theatre is the same as what affects us in all art: the heightened experience – the refined expression of an emotion – the human condition. In the transparent clarity of our emotional life lie the possibilities for the creation of new opera; for precisely from this clarity arises the simplicity of musical language that opera demands (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 459-465).

Weill’s conception of new opera was intimately linked to the crisis of contemporary politics in Germany, and to what many people saw as the crisis of modern music, affecting composers as different as Richard Strauss, Busoni, and Alban Berg. Phrases such as ‘*Krise der Oper*’, ‘*Die Krise im deutschen Operschaffen*’ and ‘*Gibt es eine Krise der Oper*’ (Cook 1988: 9) abounded at the time:

Opera, throughout its history, has been marked by continuing debate over its nature, future, and need for reform. After World War I, German writers and composers were especially concerned about opera and its future. Virtually every music journal and periodical published essays by critics and composers which debated various issues – musical, historical, and social – of what was called ‘opera crisis’ (Cook 1988: 3).

Everyone – composers, even audiences to a degree – were highly interested in the form of opera, and there seemed to be a need for revision. It could be said that the main reason for this shaking up and rethinking was the result of the progress and changes brought about by modernism. A renewed interest in the operas of Mozart, Weber, Cimarosa, Gluck, Auber and Charpentier (as included in the repertoire of the Krolloper) revealed a further indication of the ‘Weimar Republic’s concern for culture’:

The Krolloper, hailed at the time as a monumental example of the Weimar Republic’s concern for culture, opened on the 18 November 1927 with a production not of a twentieth century work, but of Beethoven’s *Fidelio*. But it was a Weimar *Fidelio* with stark cubist sets designed by Dulberg which led one reviewer to call the production “*Fidelio on Ice*”. Klemperer regarded his tenure at the Krolloper as an opportunity to put new ideas of operatic reform and renewal into practice through well-rehearsed performances, which combined the talents of separate set designers and dramatic advisers. The Krolloper’s repertory was remarkably similar to its two Berlin competitors. He resurrected unknown works by Cimarosa, Gluck, Auber and Charpentier, premiered one new opera, and

staged the first Berlin performance of a handful of other modern works (Cook 1988: 2).

This emphasis on renewal was echoed in German life generally. The aftermath of the First World War left Germany defeated and bankrupt. Everyday life had changed irreversibly, in its physical aspect, technology, socially and politically. There seemed to be so many improvements: new medicines were being discovered; transport had been transformed by the advent of the motorcar and aeroplane. Telephones and radios had been invented; industrialization was on a relentless move forward. Gold had been discovered in many parts of the world, signalling radical economic change. Even religious practice was changing as the nature of humanity was reconstructed in new terms, most notably as a result of Sigmund Freud's work on dreams, sexuality and the role of the unconscious. Karl Marx made a huge impression too, suggesting that economic factors underpin social and class identity, and predicting the fall of capitalism. The message of 'more power to the "common man!"' abounded, even in a Germany where many ordinary people were starving as a result of the punitive peace signed at Versailles after the First World War. Along with this message came the rise of *music* of the 'common man' – jazz or popular music, which was to have a far-reaching effect on classical music of the time. Weill commented on jazz thus:

Modern music has been reproached because its composers allowed themselves to be influenced more strongly by jazz through its dance forms than by art music of earlier times. In so doing, one forgets that jazz, being more than a social dance, includes elements, which vastly exceed the influential capabilities of the waltz. In a midst of a time of heightened artistry jazz appeared as a piece of nature - as the healthiest, most vigorous expression of art, which arose immediately from its popular origin to an international folk music of the broadest consequence. Why should art music barricade itself against such an influence? (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 497).

All these changes bred excitement but also confusion. Not only in opera, but all symbolic forms found themselves in crisis, and needing to re-evaluate their modes of expression:

Opera has always been a prism for change, from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* to Wagner's massive *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Modern German composers, sensing the spirit of radical change of the early 20th century, felt that the Wagnerian model was no longer appropriate; in fact they felt a need to

experiment with the very nature of music itself. In an earlier decade Luigi Russolo's *Manifesto of Noise* had ushered in the era of Modernism, as much as had Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* and Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*. Composers like Krenek, Hindemith and Weill became interested in the clear-cut forms of works from a time when the composer worked more as a craftsman than the 19th-century prototypical genius (Cook 1988: 10).

This style came to be known as neoclassicism, and it influenced most composers working in Europe in the 1930s. At the very least, the bombast, extravagance and intense subjectivity of the late-Romantic era was no longer in vogue.

Experimentation

Many composers not only experimented with the subject matter of their operas which were more intimately related to modern life than those of the past century (Krenek's *Jonny spielt Auf* for example) but they also began to experiment with the basic materials and structures of music itself: Schoenberg's twelve-tone system produced his opera *Moses und Aron* and Berg's modified version of the same system produced *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*. In his striving for 'clarity', Weill himself adopted a new style of harmonic language which he meshed with the rhythms and idioms found in the popular dance music of the time. This is evident in *Der Silbersee*. Many composers of the Wagnerian camp were resistant to the inclusion of jazz in modern 'classical' music, regarding it as lacking in intellectual substance. However, Weill succinctly sums up the value of jazz as this:

Undoubtedly today we stand at the end of an epoch in which one can speak of an influence of jazz on art music. The most essential elements of jazz have been taken up by art music...yet they no longer appear in the form of jazz, as dance music, but in transformation. Modern music has been reproached because its composers allowed them to be influenced more strongly by jazz through its dance forms than by art music of earlier times. In so doing, one forgets that jazz, being more than a social dance, includes elements, which vastly exceed the influential capabilities of the waltz. In the midst of a time of heightened artistry jazz appeared as a piece of nature – as the healthiest, most vigorous expression of art, which arose immediately from its origin to an international folk music of the broadest consequence. Why should art music barricade itself against such an influence? (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 497).

'Jazz elements' abound in *Der Silbersee*, albeit 'in transformation', as Weill explains above. Like Ravel, Weill has taken vibrant dance rhythms like the *tango*, *fox trot* and

shimmy and used them for their musical, as well as their dramatic, value. Thus they function as a means of enrichment to the modern classical style as well as a means of expression. Weill's openness to experimentation in music is evident not only in his inclusion of musical vernaculars in his theatre works, but also in his attitude to other contemporary innovators.

The Influence of Busoni

One of the greatest advocates of experimentation in the early 1900s was undoubtedly Ferruccio Busoni, an Italian-born pianist and composer who spent most of his life in Germany. He taught piano at a number of conservatoires in Europe, finally settling in Berlin. His many compositions show his superior musical thinking and he was also a renowned teacher of composition. Among his pupils were Weill and Krenek, both of whom attended his famous master classes. Busoni was deeply interested in the development of new musical trends, especially in opera, about which he wrote a book entitled *Entwurf einer neuen Aesthetik der Tonkunst* in 1907. In his treatise he rejected nineteenth-century programmatic trends in general and attacked Wagner in particular.

Busoni became a mentor and role model to many young composers. As proof of his stature, *Anbruch*, an in-house musical publication of Universal Edition which openly espoused an aggressively positive stance on modern music, devoted a double issue in 1921 to Busoni. Throughout his writings, and in his own operas, Busoni supported a new kind of opera in opposition to music drama. His operas were regarded by young composers in general as 'a relief from the stodgy and artificial continuity of the Wagnerian music drama. His last opera *Doktor Faust* (finished posthumously by his student Phillipe Jarnach) served as a model of his aesthetic practice. Busoni advocated a break with the nineteenth century and a return to older, formal and structural principles' (Cook 1988: 12).

Busoni was thus regarded as a champion of the ‘new music’ (described in its day as ‘gay’), (Alfred Einstein, ‘Gay German opera,’ *The New York Times*, 22 April 1928). He believed that art music should no longer belong to an elite well-to-do class, but that it should reflect all of society, and required corresponding forms of artistic expression. Likewise, a return to the primacy of the human voice and the creation of a new twentieth-century style of singing was a requisite.

Weill and other like-minded thinkers, in their quest towards the renewal of the operatic form, assimilated such ideals. In 1927 Weill stated in an essay entitled ‘Busoni’s Faust und die Erneuerung der Opernform’: ‘The path towards a restoration of opera could proceed only from a renewal of the formal bases of this genre, from which the musical stage works of the late nineteenth-century had departed so widely...’ (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 468). He went on to say:

It is largely to Busoni’s credit that these perceptions are no longer theory for us; we can recognise them retrospectively in his work and in our own efforts as the basis of recent operatic creations. The fusion of musical and theatrical impulses as the basis of operatic form is already reached to the highest degree in *Doktor Faust* (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 469).

Weill clearly attributes his stance on opera to Busoni. He states that it is largely to Busoni’s credit that these new ‘perceptions’ were no longer simply theory and that they resonated both in his and Busoni’s works. Weill then credits Busoni with the assertion that the fusion of musical and theatrical ‘impulses’ as the basis of operatic reform is already reached ‘to the highest degree’ in *Doktor Faust*. Weill, moreover, attributes to Busoni his own position that a more dramatic result is not achieved by ‘piling up theatrical effects’ but by the ‘intensification of the union of stage and music’ (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 469).

The new opera was thus to be one where there was clarity and order, where the story unfolded naturally before the viewer’s eyes, where almost without understanding a word the audience would be in a position to form an idea of the plot. These musical ideals can clearly be seen in Weill’s musical style and are essentially evident in *Der Silbersee*. Thus,

one may conclude that in Weill's case, Busoni was an important influence in his search for 'Die Neue Oper'. Perhaps Weill's own words do greater justice to the indebtedness of himself and his fellows to Busoni:

After the revolution in Germany we young musicians also were filled with new ideas, swollen with new hopes. But we could not shape the new that we longed for; we could not find the form for our content. We burst fetters but we could not begin anything with the acquired freedom. We stepped on new shores and forgot to look back. Thus, through the years of seclusion from the outside we underwent a spasm of excess which lay on the breast like a nightmare and yet which we loved because it made us free. Then Busoni came to Berlin. We praised him because we believed him to have achieved the goal that we were striving for...he had an effect in the last years of his life: on the few to whom he appeared as the symbol of the purest, highest artistic comprehension; on the future through his theatrical work, *Doktor Faust*, that most consummate work with regard to form, that most moving musical work of art of our day (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 462).

Weill wrote frequently about Busoni, most notably perhaps in the essay 'Busoni und die Neue Musik' (Busoni and Modern Music) written in 1925. His assessment here is:

Many know Busoni as the greatest pianist of his era. They know only a small part of his figure; they cannot comprehend the influence of this man, since they do not know that creative genius was united to an unusual degree with the highest reproductive ability...Every expression of this intellect, from the interpretation of a virtuoso piece to the most emotionally-expressive phrase of *Doktor Faust*, was of direct effect on the artistic development of his time. He had a presentiment of every new stylistic tendency in music; he stimulated and guided it until he perceived that it was obsolete. But then he also had the courage to turn back for renewal (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 461).

In Weill's own words, Busoni 'did not experiment indiscriminately; he sought new paths' (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 462). Weill then affirms Busoni's stature as a man who really brought about radical change in music. It was in Busoni's house that Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* was first performed. He adds that 'today Schoenberg is his successor to the highest musical professorship that Germany has to offer' (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 462). According to Weill, many of the ideas which 'appear self-evident to today's musicians' were first expressed by Busoni in his *Entwurf einer neuen Aesthetic der Tonkunst*. These ideas may be summed up as follows: the renunciation of music drama,

the movement forward to a 'thorough relaxation' of tonality, 'even through the 1/3-tone,' (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 462).

In the aftermath of the First World War, the Great Depression of the late 1920s, and the rebuilding of Germany in the 1930s, economic factors were enormously important. Experimentation in the arts paralleled the search for a new political order in Germany.

Economic Factors

As a result of the First World War, German citizens faced the humiliation of defeat and a punitively large war debt. Most young Germans, in escaping their unhappy past, deemed the creation of the Weimar Republic,¹² their chance at a new start. Indeed, in the early years of the Weimar Republic, Germany flourished, as reflected in its economic growth. As a result of this positive growth, the theatre flourished too. Many theatres, especially those with state support like the Krolloper, could be progressive and daring in their programming. German musical life thrived under these conditions and many opportunities were available.

It was during these years (the early twenties) that Weill was able to establish himself; and he had many successes. However, political corruption began to affect and finally plunge Germany into economic crisis, which, unfortunately, immediately preceded the world-wide Great Depression. Apart from providing ample dramatic material, these few years (1928 – 1935) posed greater challenges to young German composers like Kurt Weill. Formerly opulent opera houses began closing their doors, especially to newer works. Opera houses that previously had state funding lost it, and as a result fewer and fewer opera houses were available for the staging of operas. Audiences which had grown to include more of the German public in the 'roaring twenties', could no longer afford

¹⁰ Weimar Republic (1919-1933) this was the popular name for the republic of Germany created after World War 1. It was named after the German city in which the Constitution was drawn up (1919). It was hampered by severe economic difficulties. The Weimar constitution was suspended after Adolph Hitler became chancellor in 1933.

luxuries and by 1932 the estimated number of unemployed was beyond 6 million. This figure rose to beyond 7 million at the end of 1933 (Heinzelmann 1990: 19). State-funded opera houses like the Krolloper had to close their doors or make drastic budget cuts:

‘The Krolloper closed in July of 1931. Economic reasons were cited for the closure, even though the Krolloper cost much less to run than either of the other two houses. Certainly by 1931 the financial situation was severe, and most opera houses had been forced to make sizeable budget cuts the year before’ (Cook 1988: 3).

In the case of the Krolloper, it seemed that economic reasons were a convenient excuse to close its doors as ‘conservative critics and government officials claimed [Otto] Klemperer’s productions were leftist, if not communist-inspired, and thus smacked of *Kulturbolschewismus*’ (Cook 1988: 3).¹³ Those critics who supported the Krolloper’s efforts at operatic renewal and the staging of new works like *Jonny spielt auf* (1927) advised Klemperer that this closure was mainly due to political pressure. These economic difficulties tended to increase political pressure: as the Nazis gained more and more support the conditions got worse. Although many small opera houses like Leipzig and Frankfurt am Main did manage, on small budgets, to produce new works such as *Der Silbersee*, it seemed as if opera was once again, in dire straits.

Weill and other dedicated composers continued to write despite the lack of means to produce their works. In fact, the political and social trials of these years, it may be argued, served as excellent dramatic material for the genre ‘Der Neue Oper’.

Weill wrote in his 1932 essay entitled ‘Wirklich eine Opernkrise?’ (Actually an Opera Crisis?) that a crisis in opera did exist, one that affected theatres and producers as well as composers. The crisis he spoke of was manifest in, for example, the firing of theatre personnel who were not ‘of Aryan descent’. Lists of dismissals were published in *Die Musik* (DM), a music journal published by the Nazi party: ‘The important issue of June 1933 also contained the official bulletin section, entitled “Under Sign of Change,” where

¹³ The term *Kulturbolschewismus* was coined by the Nazi party to describe any artistic work that was not acceptable or that was too leftist in its opinion.

dismissals and appointments were listed, while featuring the most prominent of the “inadmissible” conductors, Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer’ (Meyer 1991: 38).

Aside from political pressure, this crisis was partly the result of opera producers staging works by composers such as Wagner and Strauss whose appeal was limited and whose works demanded huge resources. Modern works, on the contrary, could be staged very economically.

Weill suggested that the solution to this crisis would be to reach a wider public and thus beyond the traditional ‘specialist operatic audience’ (Kowalke 1979: 543). He notes, however, that it was difficult to stimulate genuine interest in opera, since the public had lost interest in the theatre. He likewise observed that works, which related to contemporary life and experience were most likely to gain public support and to prosper. As an example he cited *Im Weissen Rössl* (White Horse Inn), a popular *Singspiel* by Ralph Benatzky (1884-1957), which had premiered at the Grosse Schauspielhaus on the 8 November 1930. The work was nostalgically set in 1914 with a background of the Wolfgangsee and the Bavarian Alps. It achieved colossal success and was performed four to five times a week in Germany’s most prestigious opera theatres. As it happens, Weill regarded *Im Weissen Rössl* as somewhat crude and superficial, and lacking in intellectual rigour. He bemoaned public taste for their immediate seduction by this piece.

Weill continued to assert that the responsibility for the theatre situation rested on those who pressured German theatre administrators, transforming them into ‘timid, overly-cautious businessmen’ (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 543). In order to correct the situation, he averred, a balance between operatic output, budget and theatre managers with the very highest artistic aspirations should be sought. Theatre managers would have to act with more spirit, he believed, refusing to submit so easily to what he called ‘invisible censorship which in reality does not exist’ (Ibid.). The Nazis under Hitler had in many publications such as *DM* and *Völkischer Beobachter*, which regularly printed reviews of new music, criticized many of the works Weill wanted to see performed as

‘degenerate music’ (see Chapter 6). ¹⁴ These reviews were biased and, in reality, thinly disguised attacks. By 1930 many theatre managers and musicians had begun to agree with the policies of the Nazis who promised them employment and, in actual fact, many musicians of the correct calibre (non-Jewish) were selected over the many out-of-work musicians who were not Aryan, or did not agree with these policies. Many Jewish musicians, conductors and composers, such as Kreisler, had begun to leave the country ‘as soon as they sensed which way the wind was blowing’ (Kater 1997: 88):

Low on the scale of professional fortunes were Jewish or half-Jewish musicians who had found a niche in the entertainment marketplace in happier times, but with the advent of the Nazi regime were suddenly caught off guard. As they were struck by anti-Semitic decrees, most of which they hardly understood, they were excluded from the music world (Kater 1997: 94).

Many musicians married to ‘non-Jews’, including Weill and Lotte Lenya (Lenya was born Roman Catholic), were forced to file for divorce to stay employed, or else flee Germany: ‘Weill, having filed for divorce from his “Aryan” wife, Lotte Lenya, abandoned a newly acquired house in Berlin and left Germany for Paris in the expectation of better prospects’ (Kater 1997: 89).

Censorship had become a reality as theatre managers persuaded to tow the line refused to produce anything contentious. Weill lamented the fact that opera, the most powerfully expressive site of social critique, was simply being crowded out by shows intended merely to entertain. It seemed that the corruption and decadence rife in German society had perhaps bred an audience that longed for theatre that promised escapism rather than confrontation with the problems that dogged their lives.

It was Weill’s cherished notion that the purpose of theatre was to dramatise the ‘semi-important subsidiary problems of daily life’, to represent types of human behaviour, and, therefore, to challenge the audience question (Kowalke 1979: 544). In fact the audiences of the day were already being propagandised by Nazism and the ‘myths’ it promulgated

¹⁴This term was applied by the Nazis officially after 1938 to describe any works composed by essentially ‘non-Aryan’ composers such as Schoenberg and Weill as well as those who represented this new music such as Krenek and Hindemith, who had incorporated jazz into their musical idiom. Posters and brochures depicting these composers or their works were made and displayed by the Nazis at an exhibit in May 1938.

and popularised. Modern technology and techniques developed to address mass audiences made the German public an easy target for a brilliantly effective propaganda campaign.

Technology

The advent of modern technology had a huge impact on the life of the average German. Photography and film became art form; similarly technological innovation found its way onto the theatre and opera stage, and into revues and cabarets. In Weill's own *Royal Palace* (1925), an aero-express through Europe is depicted cinematically by a real aeroplane. In *Der Zar lässt sich Photographieren* (1928), a czar who is visiting Paris appears at the studio of the beautiful Madame Angèle to have his photograph taken. Many other works of this time also feature scenes from film or slide projection superimposed on the action taking place on the stage. Some works (including *Der Silbersee*) alluded to the silent movies through music or plot. Others called for cars, trains or industrial machinery to be displayed on stage:

Composers tried to incorporate as many attributes of contemporary life into all facets of the operatic production as possible. The libretti were set in the present; characters were typically everyday people or were presented as recognizable modern stereotypes. The action takes place in locales considered either modern or everyday: office buildings, elevators, train stations, cabarets, and private family dining rooms. Along with the modern setting, composers also relied on theatrical properties of the age: characters talk on the phone, play gramophones, take pictures, and shoot movies. The staging relied on up-to-date theatrical and cinematic techniques as composers tried to depict modern life on stage (Cook 1988: 4).

While opera composers were including the devices of the modern world in their new works, these very devices factor in the crisis facing this art form.

The advent of the radio made more classical music – even modern classical music – available to more people. Popular taste could easily be manipulated by this mass medium, and in turn the broader public could create their ‘hits’ and ‘heroes’. For those members of

the working class who had perhaps never been to an opera, they could now hear the music in their homes if they had a radio. It was also possible to hear intelligent discussion about music: music critics could now air their informed views to an audience over the airwaves, especially through the radio station *Der Deutsche Rundfunk*, where (as mentioned previously), Weill worked as the Berlin correspondent. Besides the many advantages of radio, there were of course, some disadvantages. One of them was that the concert halls would not necessarily be filled in future.

The radio also promoted popular music. It also became the crucial means for the promulgation of political propaganda in the hands of Hitler and his Nazi party. Thus new music found itself excluded and replaced by music which supported 'Aryan' theories and represented the fierce German idealism of Wagner, Brahms and Bruckner.

The advent of film took its toll on classical music too, although it did lead to the development of the genre of film music. However, people curious about this new entertainment seemed to prefer to spend their money on a movie ticket than on an expensive opera ticket.

Personal Crisis

The advent of democracy and capitalism brought with it new clashes and ideologies evidenced in the rise of socialism, Marxism and fascism. Certainly this is most evident in the art and literature of the time, and new theories on the human condition were explored as thinkers probed for meaning, as evidenced by the many expressionist, existentialist, dadaist and surrealist movements that began flooding modern thought. These were represented in paintings, sculptures, theatre works and a variety of other symbolic forms.

Busoni had written that opera 'has always and everywhere adapted itself to the prevailing social order' (quoted in Kowalke 1979: 480). It was inevitable therefore, that opera should strive to represent the political crisis of Weimar, and later Hitler's Germany. Weill

observed at the time that 'art receives an evermore distinct political colouring through the advancing politicisation of daily life' (Kowalke 1979: 501).

Art and music did in fact become very powerful politically and social tools under Nazism: indeed, under Goebbels' RMK (Reich Music Chamber) art and music were an important means to exercise social and political control and the manipulation of public thought (Meyer 1993: 5). As the number of unemployed Germans rose in the early thirties and opera theatres closed, many musicians found themselves out of work. Together with the rising discontent over the inadequacy and corruption of the Weimar government, the rising popularity of the socialists under Adolph Hitler, and the discrimination against Jews, these musicians found themselves in a quandary. The Nazis, as I have mentioned, were aggressively against modern music, jazz and particularly music composed by Germans of the Jewish faith. They began a campaign to rid Germany of these influences. As far back as 1923, Adolph Hitler began speaking out against certain types of music, opera included. Many Nazi newspapers and music critics expounded the greatness of the German masters of the nineteenth century and disdained the 'degenerate music' of the present.

By 1933 a plan had been devised by the Nazis to rid Germany of Weill, along with Krenek and Schoenberg. Hindemith's music was publicly declared to be 'degenerate'. By this time the Nazis had gained control of many opera theatres and put into operation a policy of employing Aryans only; they also began censoring and disrupting performances of 'degenerate' works, to the extent that Weill could not find a stage for the production of his last two German operas. The premieres of *Die Bürgschaft* (1931) and *Der Silbersee* (1932) were both disrupted by Nazis in the audience and rioting outside the theatre, and both received biting and malicious critiques in Nazi publications. Nazi storm troopers (Brown Shirts) were used to disrupt the performance of *Der Silbersee* in Magdeburg, demonstrating the extent of their hatred.

The Nazis eventually confiscated and destroyed many of these works, perhaps even some of Weill's. The extent of the determination to rid Germany of the influences they

decried was matched by their desire to destroy thousands of non-Aryans, many of whom were musicians:

Many were detained in the camps. Of course, their audiences had also dwindled. And Kulturbund events never having been a money-making proposition, their producers found it increasingly difficult to break even as the passive membership diminished year after year, owing to emigration, pauperisation, incarceration, natural death, and sometimes murder of Germany's Jews...if there were fifty thousand Jews organized in culture leagues throughout the Reich in 1936-37, this would have constituted just over 10 percent of all Jews then still living in Germany (Kater 1997: 99).

In addition to being on Hitler's 'black list' Weill was the subject of a personal attack in 1932. On going to his post box one day he found a warning: 'What's a Jew like you doing in a community like Kleinmachnow?' (Symonnette 1996: 65). However Weill, like so many others, did not take these threats seriously, hoping that the madness would soon pass: 'I think that what is going on here is so sick that it can't last longer than a few months, but I might be wrong' (Weill quoted in Symonnette 1996: 71). The implications for Weill, his career, his compositions, and his ideas about new opera, were profound and life-changing. The 'crisis' of new opera had been, by the time of *Der Silbersee*, overshadowed by a human crisis of almost unthinkable dimensions. But the struggle to move towards 'new opera' was of a different order, existed in a different realm, and was not easily to be abandoned. The next chapter examines the source of Weill's ideas.

CHAPTER 4

Towards ‘Die Neue Oper’

When Weill joined *Die Deutsche Rundfunk* (Berlin) in 1924 as chief musical correspondent, it was a job that provided him not only with a regular income but also with the opportunity to develop more clearly – for himself and for other young composers – his understanding of new opera. It was also an opportunity to express his views publicly.

The first essay Weill wrote during the *Rundfunk* period was entitled ‘Bekenntnis zur Oper’ (Commitment to Opera) and it was published in Vienna for the *Jahrbuch 1925 der Universal Edition*. In this essay Weill declares his total commitment to the reform of opera and suggests that all composers should likewise consider their motives in writing for the genre:

We cannot approach opera with the snobbism of indifferent renunciation. We cannot write operas and at the same time lament the shortcomings of this genre. We cannot view operatic composition as the fulfilment of a purely superficial obligation while we expend our true substance on other forms. We must understand that our formal idea is fulfilled in the actualities of the stage; we must be convinced that a theatrical work is capable of reproducing the significant elements of our music; without reservation, we must commit ourselves to opera (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 458).

Weill felt passionately that opera and other theatrical genres should display music at its most powerful. But he felt equally that music for the stage had in recent times been robbed of its potency; had been overshadowed by the belief that ‘nothing more could be drawn from or added to the genre of music drama’ (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 458). Weill argued that opera composers had become too burdened by a ‘literary wrapper’ and a ‘materialistic orientation’ in the arts (Kowalke 1979: 458). In order to create new meaning, composers had turned towards absolute music and had begun looking back to the great pre-classicists. This spirit of ‘Neoclassicism’ was expressed by some composers in a reverence for the operas of Handel, Gluck and Mozart: ‘Weill echoed Busoni further

in claiming to have found inspiration not in Wagner but in Mozart, a composer whom they both revered' (Cook 1988: 18).¹⁵ As has already been noted in Chapter 3, this revival saw the staging of many unknown or previously forgotten operas of the past:

For young composers, the successful Handel revival presented the paradoxical solution of looking to the past for new compositional recourses and ideas. Egon Wellesz, in particular, embraced Handel and maintained that through him the music drama had been replaced and opera crisis resolved. And to varying degrees, Krenek, Weill, and Hindemith adopted clear-cut sectional forms in keeping with Handel and in opposition to a Wagnerian formal approach (Cook 1988: 10).

Weill takes special care to mention that theatrical works should be approached so as to ensure the 'natural' freedom of instrumental music, i.e., so that it can be developed as imaginatively as it is in chamber music. He cautions that this cannot be achieved by merely transferring elements of absolute music into opera; this is, he remarks, the path to the cantata and oratorio. On the contrary:

[The] dramatic impetus that opera requires can be a very essential component of any musical product. Mozart taught me that. He is no different in opera than in the symphony or string quartet... Therefore, we have a stage-like presentation even in the 'Brio' movements of his symphonies. With Mozart this reaches the point where the addition of a text one can convert any movement from his chamber music or orchestral works into a dramatically-animated operatic aria or even to a finale which advances the plot (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 459).

This notion can be traced back to Busoni's 1926 'Über die Partitur des Doktor Faust' (On the Score of Dr. Faustus) which includes an excerpt from a Mozart piano concerto as illustration. Weill's contemporaries observed and identified this Mozartian model in his operas, as can be seen from contemporary reviews. Heinz Jolles actually went to the extent of publishing an essay entitled 'Paraphrase über Kurt Weill' (Paraphrase on Kurt Weill), *Neue Musik-Zeitung* 49 (May 1928), in which he compared Weill's operas with those of Mozart and Verdi.

¹⁵ 'Neoclassicism is a term referring to the 20th-century musical movement which (especially in the 1920s) revolted against the lush, emotional, chromatic romanticism of music written towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Neoclassical composers strove for clarity of texture, lightness of orchestration, coolness of approach, and a back-to-the-18th-century (especially back-to-Bach) respect for counterpoint and close-knit musical forms' (Collins 1976: 376). In opera there was a back-to-Mozart attitude advocated by Busoni and his pupils.

Weill goes on to state that it is possible, even in concert performance of the conversation between Sarastro and Pamina in the *Die Zauberflöte*, to be aware of true dramatic essence: ‘Mozart certainly does not achieve this by extra-musical means; on the contrary, it is achieved by the most fundamental expression of music’ (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 459). He sees the response of the composer as an intuitive one, and concludes that what moves us in theatre is the same as in art, that is, a ‘heightened experience – the refined expression of an emotion – the human condition’ (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 459). Mozart was able in his operas to get behind the details of plot so as to convey the true meaning of the situation: this is evident in masterpieces like *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute*, all of which contain strong social comment. Thus the music is able to express more than the text; music is capable of true dramatic expression.

In order for the true emotional substance of music to ‘speak’ (be it in opera, oratorio or a piano piece), the composer needs above all to strive for clarity:

The crystalline clarity and the inner tension of musical diction can be based only on the transparency of our emotional substance, and then our music again possesses the typical operatic elements: sharp accentuation, precision of dynamics, speech-like agitation of melody. Thus, opera again can be the most precious vessel, absorbing all forms and types of music (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 459).

At this point, in ‘Bekenntnis zur Oper’, Weill observes that the substance of the text has a direct bearing on the outcome of the music. Wagner’s ‘larger-than-life characters’, for example, can only express themselves through the thick textures of music drama. While this was logical for Wagner, Weill points out that such ‘verismo’ cannot express the ‘most noble human sentiments of pre-war man’ (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 459), nor does it have the ‘clarity’ of expression to reach a wider audience.

The essay ‘Der Neue Oper’ (1926) is even more strongly anti-Wagnerian. The following extract, written at much the same time, on the issue of addressing school children about Wagner, makes his position clear:

I have just played to you the music of Wagner and by his followers. You have seen that this music consists of so many notes, that I was unable to play them all. You would have liked now and then to join in singing the tune, but this proved impossible. You also noticed that the music made you feel sleepy, and drunk, as alcohol or an intoxicating drug might have done. You do not wish to go to sleep. You wish to hear music that can be understood without explanation. You probably wonder why your parents attend concerts. It is, with them, a mere matter of habit: nowadays, there are matters of greater interest to all, and if music cannot serve the interests of all, its existence is no longer justified (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 532).

In 'Der Neue Oper', Weill expounded on his belief that 'people' (composers) worldwide have recognized a need for 'clarity': a need to escape the Wagnerian sphere of influence, not only in terms of music but also the subject matter. It was necessary to move away from the 'larger-than-life' characters that appeared on the stage of the nineteenth century together with their representation of 'realistic events' (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 464). Here Weill cites Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* as an example of a work not completely exempt from the influence of Wagner.

For Weill Richard Strauss, on the other hand, took a decisive step towards the creation of an 18th-century 'chamber' approach to opera for the sake of music-making, especially in *Elektra* (1909) and *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912). Clearly Weill's own *Dreigroschen Oper*, modelled on John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, is also a case in point. *Der Silbersee*, too, is what he called in 'Der Neue Oper' [1926] a 'transitional' work, written in an 'intermediary genre' (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 465).

When it comes to performance practice, Weill identifies the need for operatic singers to become more aware of the physical needs of theatre; he knew only too well that performers might be well equipped to cope with musical and vocal challenges but that they were less attuned to the importance of expressive gesture and bodily movement. Indeed Weill devotes considerable space to discussion of what he calls 'gestic music'. Given the need, in the performance of his works, for well-trained singers who are also good actors (and visa versa), this is not surprising.

Weill considers operatic performers who master the appropriate gestures as well as the music as not only crucial to his concept of 'Die Neue Oper', but crucial in the making of opera the most purposeful form of theatre: 'Musical theatre can even surpass drama in this point, because it can fill every minute area of the stage with musical activity through the inherent mobility of opera' (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 466).

Gestic Music

Weill observes, in various writings, that there is a specific 'pace' to the stage, and that this translates into music, action and drama. He notes that music thus has a 'gestic' quality and that it is important for composers of stage works to observe this phenomenon. If the natural gestic qualities of the music are preserved, the correct pace on stage is achieved and produces the 'reciprocal effect': a true unity of text and music which ultimately creates real drama. Weill also notes that it is these gestic qualities which allow for the intensification of the drama. Weill pioneered these ideas and used them in his stage works.

In an essay entitled 'Über den gestischen Charakter der Musik' (Concerning the Gestic Character of Music) written in 1929, Weill expounded on these ideas as well as expanding on his concept of 'Die Neue Oper'.

In the first paragraphs of this essay, Weill asks, '[w]hat are the occasions for music on the stage?' and '[h]ow is music for the theatre constructed, and are there definite characteristics that identify it as theatrical music?' He observes that there must be specific features that permit music to seem appropriate for the theatre, qualities that may be summarized under his concept of 'gestic' music. Weill rationalises that the theatre of the past – the 'preceding era' – was written for its 'sensual palatability' which sought to present the 'material' experience, the 'intoxication of the creative moment,' and the 'ecstasy' of the artist (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 491). However, he states that the other form of theatre which seemed to be gaining popularity in his time was for the 'thinking man' who, wanting to think, finds the continual excitement of the senses a

hindrance to the theatrical experience. Since the new opera had to involve the ‘thinking man’, its substance had to remove this hindrance to theatrical experience. It must reflect the human condition. The composer must deny himself ‘the epicurean posture which the audience renounces’ and no longer emphasise the music at the expense of the actors and the action. Weill promotes theatre which should be totally ‘unromantic’, i.e., free from the ‘narcotic properties’ of romantic music, which displays mankind in an exceptional, unnatural state, and which for him is best represented in Wagner (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 492).

Therefore, the text for the composer of new opera has to be approached in a different way, if the opera is to reflect real life or real ‘man’. Music cannot be used simply for manufacturing atmosphere or as background. It has to fulfil a dramatic function:

The form of opera is an absurdity if it does not succeed in granting music a predominant position in its overall structure and in execution of even the most particular details. The music of an opera cannot abandon the whole task of the drama and its idea to the text and the stage setting; it must take an active role in the presentation of the proceedings (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 492).

‘Die Neue Oper’ had, therefore, to be almost expressionist in the way it related to the dehumanising effects of industrialisation, war, and technology. This could be effected musically through what he called a ‘fundamental gestus’:

Now, as is well-known, music lacks all capacity for psychological or characterizing effect. Instead, music possesses one capacity which is of decisive significance for the representation of man in the theatre: it can even create a type of fundamental *gestus*, which prescribes a definite attitude for the actor and eliminates any doubt or misunderstanding about the respective incident (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 492).

Weill extends this interesting point, finding ‘gestic music’ wherever an incident relating men to one another is present. He cites examples: Bach’s *Passions*, Mozart’s operas, Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, and compositions by Offenbach and Bizet.

It is difficult to know exactly what Weill meant by ‘gestus’ or ‘gestic music’, although one gets a sense of it from his writing. Kowalke suggests it can be likened to the mid-Baroque doctrine of ‘Affekt’ – the expression of human emotion by natural or honest

response to the text. Weill intimates (in his essay on gestic music) that such response can be purely through music, not necessarily through music only in conjunction with text. It may be, as Kowalke says, ‘both gist and gesture; an attitude or a single aspect of an attitude expressible in words or actions’ (1979: 495).

Other writers argue that gestic music is ‘the clear and stylised expression of the social behaviour of human beings towards each other’ (Kowalke 1979: 495). In the literature surrounding Weill and his idea of gestic music, a common understanding is that the term refers to a more ‘social’ presentation in favour of individual characterization and psychological function of the music. Hence, it is the presentation of the human condition as subject matter. This can be seen as a focal point in Weill’s work from as early as 1924 in *Der Protagonist*. Weill also discussed these ideas as far back as 1926 in his essays on Mozart’s music. Other thinkers on this subject have suggested that the idea of gestic music was originally an idea of Bertolt Brecht, which Weill simply adopted. It is certainly true that Brecht was himself very much agreement with these ideas and wrote extensively on the subject. This may well have helped develop Weill’s musical thought. However, no matter who the originator of these ideas may have been, it is clear that they were significant to Weill and that, by the time he wrote *Der Silbersee*, they had become so well synthesized and so much part of his individual style, that it can be said that he had managed to achieve his goal. There are many instances in the work where the music seems to express more than words could, i.e. it is gestic in character. Examples are the melodrama (2) in the finale of the work, where the music in a gestic manner enables us to feel the emotional transformation of Olim and Severin; and we experience catharsis, regardless of whether we can understand German or not.

Weill ends the essay on gestic music by stressing that ‘only a form of drama for which music is indispensable can adapt itself fully to the needs of that purely musical work of art that we call opera’ (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 493).

Other Terms: ‘Cultic’, *Gebrauchsmusik*, *Zeitoper*, Epic Opera

At this point it is useful to look at some of the terms for ‘new’ opera which others have attributed to Weill or applied to his operatic compositions.

Weill uses various alternatives to ‘new’ or ‘gestic’ opera, in his essay ‘Verschiebungen in der musikalischen Produktion’ (Shifts in Musical Composition) of 1927. He begins by eschewing the 19th- century world of programme music, realism, and symbolism, although, ironically, he retains the latter quite strongly in *Der Silbersee*. He notes a trend towards the ‘cultic’ in European music and a tendency towards a very cultivated type of *Gebrauchsmusik* in Rieti, Poulenc, Auric, and its opposite in Russia. In Germany, however, there was a more urgent need for the expression of communal principles, and ‘unmistakable regrouping of the public’ as a result of huge social change. The *gesellschaftlichen* (‘socially-exclusive’) arts were no longer relevant, were losing their appeal and their value: only art that was *gemeinschaftsbildenden* (‘community-advancing’) (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 479) was of value. Here Weill’s approach was strongly identified with the group of socially-orientated artists who called themselves *Der Novembergruppe*.

In seeking to create opera that embraced a wider public interest he set certain artistic boundaries (Kowalke 1979:110): ‘under no circumstances should the impression be created that we want to renounce the intellectual bearing of the serious musician in order to be able to compete fully with the producers of lighter musical wares’ (Ibid.). It is for this reason that Weill shunned the terms *Gebrauchsmusik* and *Zeitoper*. While he ‘approved of those composers who put aside aesthetic appraisal in order to eliminate the boundaries between ‘art music’ and ‘music for use’, he warned against making concessions to public taste: ‘we may only change our music so far that we can carry on our intellectual tasks, the duties of the artist in his time, in an entirely perceptible, entirely understandable language’ (Kowalke 1979:110).

Weill's objection to the term *Zeitoper* lay in his critique of the notion that works of art were only 'of their time', and could only speak of such. The example of *Der Silbersee*'s transference from 1930s Germany to 21st- century South Africa is ample evidence of such transcendence. This work, rather, was a realisation of another notion in Weill's writing, namely 'epic opera' – not epic in the Wagnerian sense, but in the sense of 'telling' the story of man. Epic opera, he wrote:

no longer proposes to form its plot according to moments of suspenseful tension, but to tell about man, his actions and what impels him to commit them. Music in the new operatic theatre renounces pumping up the action within, glazing over the transitions, supplying the background for events, and stirring up passions...since the narrative form never permits the spectator to be in suspense or uncertainty over the stage events, music can reserve for itself its own independent, purely musical effect (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 484).

It was Brecht who first developed the theory of Epic Opera (see Jarman 1982: 47 & 59), although Weill's development of the idea was less avowedly Marxist and more concerned with revolution on the stage than in the streets. As Weill put it after Brecht had stayed with him and rearranged the furniture to make his bedroom look like a communist manifesto: 'I'm not interested in composing Karl Marx; I like to write music' (Weill quoted in Jarman 1982: 60).

Brecht's tabulation of the characteristics of Epic Opera as distinct from 19th- century music drama is given below, in Table 1. This is not a simplistic declaration of difference; it shows an important 'shift in emphasis' as Brecht put it (quoted in Weiss 2002: 289), and as such, sheds useful light on the ideas expressed by Weill in his essays and in *Der Silbersee*.

Table 1. Bertolt Brecht's Tabulation showing the 'shift in emphasis' between *The Dramatic Theatre Form* and *The Epic Theatre Form*.¹⁶

<i>Dramatic Theatre Form</i>	<i>Epic Theatre Form</i>
Action	Narration
Involves spectator in a staged	Makes the spectator an onlooker
Action	But
Consumes his active participation	Awakens his participation
Enables him to feel	Forces him to make decisions
Experience	Global view
The spectator is transported	He is confronted with something
Somewhere	
Suggestion	Argument
His feelings are preserved	He is driven to recognize
The spectator is in the midst,	The spectator stands opposite,
He empathizes	He studies
Mankind as a known quantity	Mankind the object of inquiry
Unchangeable mankind	Changeable and changing mankind
Expectation as to the outcome	Expectation as to the unfolding
Concatenation of scenes	Action each scene independent
Development	Montage
Linear events	Curves
Evolutionary necessity	Skips
Mankind as fixed point	Mankind as process
Thought determines being	Societal being determines thought
Feeling	Reason

¹⁶ The table has been imported into this study in its original layout, as Brecht intended it to be. It is typical of Brecht's style, hence the run on ideas and odd blank spaces.

Brecht states quite emphatically that the question of 'primacy' has to be carefully considered in Epic Opera; that is, which comes first, the music, the text, or the production. It is clear from the writings of Weill, that there should be no such 'primacy', that the music, text and production are equally important (quoted in Weiss 2002: 293). Should the composer's response be correct, there would be the creation of focused, energetic and pure drama achieved by equality between these elements. In this respect, Weill and Brecht did not agree. Brecht felt that 'radical separation of elements' (Ibid.) was necessary in order to achieve the goal of innovation and ultimately operatic reform. From other sources it is clear that Weill and Brecht did not always agree musically and that Brecht, though not a composer nor specifically trained in music, held strong opinions on modern music namely Epic Opera. Though Weill regarded some of Brecht's opinions on modern music as useful, he did not generally agree with Brecht, hence his reluctance in 1933 to work with Brecht on a new project.

It is apparent from studying *Der Silbersee* more closely, that these Brechtian ideas are present, if in a somewhat watered-down fashion. However, the work seems to be an assimilation and synthesis of all that has come to constitute Weill's mature musical style. Weill felt perhaps, that Brecht's overbearing attitude put his position as a responsive composer at risk and thus interfered with his creativity, despite their past successes, namely *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*. It is however important to stress that Brecht's radical theories, knowledge and vast dramatic experience doubtless enriched Weill's sense of theatre and drama.

From Weill's writing it is apparent that his music would embrace elements of clarity and reciprocity between text and music. New opera would speak to, and about, humanity and 'human-ness'; it would avoid the artificiality of 19th-century opera. It would be epic rather than merely dramatic because it dealt with current issues and would be applicable to real life. Perhaps the new direction for opera would be better served by a term stronger than 'new'; however, and in light of the experience of Weill in South Africa, where 'protest' was part of the culture for many decades, I suggest the term 'Protest Opera'.

Few German composers identified with Weill's painstakingly and methodically formulated views on opera in the late 20s and early 30s. Then, too, Weill was Jewish, and was associated – even if only in social circles – with Marxists and revolutionaries. By 1932 his attempt at operatic reform was certainly viewed with suspicion. Indeed, Weill and other 'modernist' composers such as Schoenberg, Krenek and Hindemith along with supporters of this movement and other Jewish musicians, were viewed as 'degenerates' by Hitler and the Nazi Party; and their music was referred to as 'degenerate', as has already been indicated (Meyer 1993: 123).

Indeed, Weill was a 'degenerate' artist, un-German, publicly denounced; his music was denounced too. 'Weill would never forget attending a Nazi mass rally in Augsburg, his birthplace, in 1930 and hearing Hitler refer to him, Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann as "alien influences rampant in Germany" which the Fuhrer promised to root out. Fearing recognition, Weill quietly slipped away' (Thomas, Argus: 2001). The year *Der Silbersee* was premiered the following song was popularised by the Nazi storm troopers:

Sharpen the long knives at the sidewalk! /Let the Knives glide into Jewish bodies!
/Thick blood must flow, /We shit on the freedom of the Jewish republic. /should
the hour of retaliation arrive, /We are prepared for any mass murder. /Up with the
Hohenzollerns on the lamppost! /let the dogs hang until they fall down! /A black
pig is hanging in the synagogue, /Throw a hand grenade into parliaments! /Throw
the concubine out of princely beds, /Smear the guillotine with Jewish fat! (Quoted
in Meyer 1993:73).

The first performances of *Die Bürgschaft*, *Mahagonny* and *Der Silbersee* fell under directed attack from the Nazis precisely because they *were* a danger to the State. Not only are the dramatic and musical materials of these pieces in violent protest against the conservative in art (supported by the State), but the plots and characters were blatantly satirical, exposing corruption, prejudice – even satirising Hitler himself. *Der Silbersee* is an achievement of 'musical activism' as potent as protest culture in any other regime. It was a catalyst for public feeling: its artistic success – 'the most unequivocal critical praise that Weill had ever experienced' (Symonette 1996: 77) contrasted absolutely with its

denunciation as ‘mindless, inferior, sick’ work (Ibid.). On March 1933, not quite three weeks after its premiere, all three productions were closed.

After Weill left Germany in May 1933 a fascist burning of books destroyed many important works of this era including the original *Kiepenheuer* edition of *Der Silbersee*. Kaiser, who had collaborated with Weill on this opera, and who was considered Germany’s most notable expressionist playwright, was dismissed from the writers’ section of the Prussian Academy of Arts and forced into seclusion in Grünheide until he emigrated in 1938. The Nazis expunged many other Jewish musicians, composers, artists and writers from 1933 until the end of the Second World War in 1945.

Der Silbersee in many ways departed from convention, presenting the listener with the challenge of the ‘new’. It is a radical and progressive step towards an art form hallowing the values of humanity while at the same time protesting against the trends of the past and the political oppression of its time. No less a critic than Theodor Adorno recognised the way in which Weill employed ‘shocks’ both musically and politically, to produce the most progressive and critical popular music of the day’ (Jay 1979: 184).

CHAPTER 5

Der Silbersee: Analysis of a Protest Opera

‘At that time Weill wrote the music to *Der Silbersee*: it was something splendid. And it is something immortal, for art lives longer than all politics’ (Georg Kaiser, 3 July 1941, quoted in Heinzelmann 1990:18).

This work marks a turning point in Weill’s musical career. As has been established in Chapters 1 and 2, Weill and Kaiser had collaborated before on many theatre projects. In some respects, it is possible to argue that the collaboration between Brecht and Weill (represented in *Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny*) seems to have dominated Weill’s career to such an extent that relationships with other playwrights have been overlooked.

After meeting Kaiser in order to discuss the new project, Weill enthusiastically related the former’s ideas about *Der Silbersee* in a letter to his publishers on 2 August 1932: ‘The matter of the new play with Georg Kaiser is developing very promisingly. In this last week I have worked daily with Kaiser, and we have completed a draft of a very fine play’ (Weill quoted in Heinzelmann 1990: 22). It can be safely assumed, then, that this collaboration was indeed both close (‘we have completed’) and productive. Also that the ‘fruit’ could be expected to be artistically ‘valuable’, adding to the stature of both composer and librettist.

My analysis uses a synopsis as the guideline (since this is not a well-known opera),¹⁷ with regular comments on music, libretto and political inferences in the work.

¹⁷ My analysis of *Silbersee* is almost entirely based on my empirical knowledge of the work, a good CD recording, a few sketchy articles on the opera and the scores of a couple of the most important numbers (Fennimore’s arias, the Shop Girls duet, Severin’s aria with the small chorus of men at the beginning of the opera, The Lottery Agent’s aria and Frau Von Luber and Baron Laur’s duet at the end of the work) which I was able to obtain. At the time that I began the research (2001) I was unable to locate the score of this opera in South Africa. It was not present in any of the Music Libraries in South Africa (I had conducted a thorough search). In 2001 – 2002 I made extensive international enquiries through Internet to many big European and American Music Publishing houses. In 2002 Jenny and Nobby Rouner of Specialized Music Distributors in Sandton enquired on my behalf at the annual Musik Messe in Frankfurt as to the availability of the score. They were unable to assist me as none of the publishers had even heard of the work. Via Internet I was able to ascertain that the score did in fact exist as a piano/vocal reduction and had been printed as Weill.K., *Der Silbersee: Ein Wintermärchen* Piano and Vocal score; Warner Bros; VE 10464. I

Synopsis

The work is scored for full symphony orchestra, chorus (SATB) and a number of (solo) characters whom I will list in order of singing and speaking roles. Singing roles are Olim (baritone), Severin (tenor), Frau von Lubber (mezzo-soprano), Fennimore (soprano), Baron Laur (tenor), Lottery agent (tenor), Four Lads – Friends of Severin (two baritones and two basses), Two Shop Girls (sopranos). Speaking roles are a Fat Policeman, Old Doctor, Young Doctor, Nurse, and Servant.

Act 1

Act 1 (Overture)

The opera begins with a short orchestral overture which Weill also uses at the beginning of Act III, serving as a framing device somewhat like a 17th-century ‘ritornello’. The Act III overture while the beginning is similar to that of Act I is slightly longer and more developed; in that it contains new thematic material making it more akin to the overall thematic material of Act III.¹⁸

The Act II overture is the shortest and is totally unrelated to the overtures of the other two acts. It sets the scene for Olim’s castle in which the most important action in the opera takes place. It is ominous and reminiscent of the Grave Diggers number at the beginning

emailed Warner Bros directly with these details and was informed that the score was out of print and that I would not be able to purchase it. In the mean time I acquired anthologies of Weill’s songs (see bibliography), which contained the two Fennimore songs, the Lottery Agent’s Song, etc. These were ordered from Universal Edition by Specialized Music Distributors in Sandton. Since then I have contacted Boosey and Hawkes and Julliard Bookstore (September 2006) to no avail. I have subsequently found a copy, courtesy of Professor A. Gabbato, in the U.C.T Music Library and it is to this that I refer (Weill, K. *Der Silbersee: Ein Wintermärchen*; UE 10464; ISMN M-008-01671-4; UPC 8-03452-00561-2; ISBN 3-7024-0794-4). Actual music analysis is in fact a minor part of this research report, which is rather a contextualisation of the work’s social and political potent: hence the relatively small number of music examples cited in this chapter. Where the score was available, more detail has been provided.

¹⁸ In The Spier production of *The Silver Lake* in 2001 the overture to Act III was an exact repeat of Act I’s overture. The reader may note that on consultation of the actual score this is incorrect. On the BMG recording (even recordings seem to vary) the overture is longer and in three parts.

of the opera. This overture has a strong, slow, march-like rhythm which anticipates the death knell we hear later on in Act 3, Scene 3 in Severin's 'Odysseus Song'.

Returning to the opening and closing overtures, they are in contrast, energetic and built on an ostinato dotted-semiquaver rhythm, a rhythmic cell that reappears in other numbers too, permeating the structure of the whole work and seeming to drive home the issues at stake each time it appears. In essence, this rhythm symbolizes the on-going strife facing humanity, the continual turning of the wheel of fortune. One day the social and political system may favour one and the next day, it all seems to be against one, as we discover in the opening scene. This action seems to be cyclical as evidenced in the politics of Germany at the time. The rhythmic cell also signifies as a whole, the hustle and bustle of modern life. The overture is musically and dramatically important, providing the impetus and energy for what is to follow.

Act 1 Scene 1

In complete contrast to the overture, Act I Scene I opens with a sombre funeral dirge. This is, however, consistent with the analogy of the wheel of fortune, the political system, which can be ever-changing. Two of the 'Lads' are digging a grave. As they dig they sing:

How deep is a grave dug? It's all the same to the dead, but the dead upset us, so the grave is dug still deeper. It's not all the same to the living. Whether night or day, in sunshine or under the moon, we shovel a pitch-black grave, for the dead, the dead are blind. One of us helpfully and thoroughly buries the other...the grave waits. Because that's how men are (Salter 1990: 37).

The two men offer an image of man's nature. Their words are mournful and symbolic, for the death that they refer to is not an individual one but communal: it is the aspirations of the underprivileged, the oppressed that have been killed and are buried by the corruption of the political system of the time.

Rhythm and tone colour take on the darkness and solemnity of the words, the bass voices convey the black ‘depths’ of the grave. Traditionally, opera composers have often scored the parts of villains or comic parts for basses; Weill’s use of bass voices here strengthens the satire. The orchestral texture is thick and makes use of the brass, string and percussion sections of the orchestra. Again, there is a repeated ostinato in the bass line, underscored by the timpani; it is a death knell, and can be viewed as a warning to those in power.

Kurt Weill’s harmonic language is distinctive and easily recognizable. Its most persistent characteristic is a tonal ambivalence resulting from what has been described by John Waterhouse as its ‘semitonal instability’ (quoted in Kowalke 1979: 191). Weill favoured the progression of root chords, sliding chromatically from tonic to subdominant, to the subdominant of the subdominant, and so on. This normally occurs in the bass part in sequences of descending perfect fifths. Thus, chords or harmonic clusters dissolve into the next chord or complex through the downward chromatic shift of a semitone by one or more notes. The result is a continual shifting between implied major and minor harmonies, while a tonal centre is held. The resulting tonal ambivalence can be found in many instances in this work. For example, the ‘March for the Effigy of Hunger’ (which directly follows the grave-digging) shows this ambiguity, with the tonal centre [B] only apparent in the bass. This tonal centre is also further obscured by the chromatic minor thirds (bars 22-24). The cadence point (bar 24), however, seems to lack the third of the chord (A), but contains the seventh, making the open interval of a fifth in the soprano and alto line more obvious. This creates the effect of a total ambiguity or confusion in tonality (see Example 1) (Kowalke 1986:142). As the orchestral and piano reduction score of *Der Silbersee* are not available (see footnote on page 61) — apart from a few songs contained in a Centennial Anthology (a collection in two volumes printed by Warner Bros, which commemorate the centenary of Weill’s birth and contain the most memorable of Weill’s vocal music) — many of the music examples cited in this analysis have been drawn from Kemp and Kowalke’s analysis of the work. It should be noted that they do not concur with my own analysis.



Example 1. March for the Effigy of Hunger, Act 1 Scene 1, 22-24

Severin enters, and together they bury a straw man, a symbol of their hunger and discontent. Severin and the Four Lads sing of their need to ‘Buckle the belt a notch tighter’ (Salter 1990: 38). They are starving and unemployed, a direct reference to the plight of many Germans at that time.

It soon becomes clear that Severin is a ‘spokesman for the underprivileged’, as Kowalke puts it (Kowalke 1986: 137). He sings, ‘At dawn the baker bakes the very finest bread, the very finest wheaten bread. But whoever has forgotten his money may not eat the wheaten bread. For him there’s no bread in his need. Buckle your belt a notch tighter.’ The contemporary German audience would fully identify with this situation, those watching in positions of power, influence or privilege might equally have felt uncomfortable. Ironically, the song is energetic and rhythmical, and has a tempo marking of *Allegro giusto*. This is typical of Weill’s musical style, as he ironically juxtaposes ‘inappropriate’ music and text to heighten the dramatic aspect. In this example Weill has again used the characteristic ‘semitonal’ shifts, patterns of downward moving perfect fifths and fourths which are evident in the harmonic structure of the bass line as well as the chordal accompaniment in the soprano, alto and tenor lines. The melody line itself is built on leaps of a fifth and fourth (see bars 47-49). The effect created is a total blurring of tonality; each melodic sequence requiring a shift in tonality for accompaniment while the bass line becomes an ostinato (A – G – D – G), holding the fragments together. (See Example 2) (Kowalke 1979: 302). Harmonically it is evident that Weill is trying to achieve something different here.



Example 2. At Dawn The Baker Bakes, Act 1 Scene 1, 46-50

Act 1 Scene, 2 & 3

In scene 2, Severin and the Four Lads from the shores of the Silver Lake see a shop in which The Two Shop Girls are sorting and arranging goods. In this scene Weill and Kaiser are criticizing the corrupt economic practices, greed and decadence, especially of the powerful. While the girls are working, they sing about the firm's principles: all the goods sold are to be fresh each day; the food that is not sold has to be destroyed, not given away. These are the firm's rules. The first shop girl questions this practice; she is answered by the second, who states that it makes 'the most profound sense, so as not to lower prices by excessive supply' (Salter 1990: 39). It is clear that these girls, however 'sweet' and caring they may appear, are influenced by the regime and pay lip service to its economic policy. They go on to say that they 'cannot think straight!' (Ibid.) and that they actually do have some feelings and would help those in need if it were in their power to do so. They continue to philosophise on the economy.

Important innovations with regard to Weill's musical style and dramatisation emerge from this scene. Kowalke has shown how Kemp's essay 'Music as Metaphor: *Der Silbersee*' (quoted in Kowalke 1986:135-140) suggests that words and music fulfil separate but equally important roles. *Der Silbersee* is episodic in nature; the music functions as a means of binding scenes together. As the music and text have become bound together too, it is evident that they have become determining factors for the inclusion of music and dialogue in scenes — hence the reluctance to cut parts out of the

work.¹⁹ This can also be observed in the structure of the score and in the outlines of the scenes. Kemp notes that some scenes have varied amounts of music, or no music and only dialogue. Others have only ‘occasional music’; some are framed by music.

Thus, Kemp concludes, there is a hierarchy of values in the work: music features in proportion to the presence or absence of emotion expressed. For example, in Olim’s Monologue in Act 1 Scene 5 and 6, as well as his other dialogues, music is important and present, while in the scenes in which the ‘evil’ Frau von Luber is present, music is seldom present, if not at all. This seems to be in line with Weill’s notion that ‘[m]usic can only express human sentiments. I’d never write a simple measure for purely aesthetic reasons in an effort to create a new style’ (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 299).

Singing is also part of the hierarchy of values, as Kemp points out, and thus intrinsic to the drama. The most important sympathetic ‘human voices’ in the work are given the greatest amount to sing. This can also be extended to the quality and variety of the music. Severin, Fennimore and Olim sing the most, apart from the chorus; their music also has the most contrast in terms of style and form. Those characters who exhibit the best possible human qualities speak the least; Fennimore has the least to say in terms of dialogue, and expresses herself almost entirely through song, while the Fat Policeman, an obvious caricature, does not sing at all.

Weill illustrates the development of ‘human-ness’ in the character of Olim, who undergoes a complete transformation to become what Kaiser may have felt was ‘the idea of the new man’ whose ‘true nature had yet to emerge’ (quoted in Heinzelmann 1990:18), by allowing Olim to sing more and more as the work progresses. This transformation is also expressed through the use of melodrama. Notably, the other characters like The Shop Girls, Frau von Luber and Baron Laur only have one opportunity to sing, and this music is in the nature of an ensemble.

¹⁹ Weill’s publishers, Dr. Heinsheimer and Schnitzler at Universal Edition, felt that certain cuts were necessary to the play as, it was long and ‘confusing’ due to its ‘great length’ (Heinsheimer quoted in Heinzelmann 1990: 23).

If the characters' degree of humanity can be judged by their opportunities to express themselves in song, then theoretically the 'evil' characters should not sing at all. But since this is an opera rather than a singspiel, this is not quite the case. And in fact music *is* occasionally used to express a 'false' heart, as when the Lottery Agent sings his only song in the work – a persuasive seduction of Olim in Act 1 Scene 6. One might argue that Weill has used the hierarchy of values even in terms of distinguishing degrees of humanness through the singing ability of different characters and the harmonic characteristics of each song. The voices of Frau von Luber and Baron Laur, for example, are not 'meant' to be pleasant: shrill, ugly voices are more effective in dramatising their lack of humanity. They are also the only characters who sing a duet in unison. The Shop Girls (who are more sympathetic characters) and who have better vocal abilities sing mostly in 'harmony', while Severin and Fennimore, the most humane characters of all, have the most moving and beautiful duet to sing with beautiful harmonies. Apart from the Lottery Agent, Severin and Fennimore are the only characters who sing solos, and they have the most to sing in the opera.

Kowalke reminds us that song is central to Weill's compositions:

The song is one of the units of musical structure most central to Weill's compositions dating from 1927 to 1934... Weill's remarks about the *Song* are, for the most part, limited to discussion of its Gestic function within epic theatre. The term itself was an innovation, for Weill and Brecht adopted it as a German word to describe a particular type of vocal composition (Kowalke 1979:132).

Weill aptly demonstrates what is meant by the term 'Song' in this scene, which he entitled 'Song der Beiden Verkäuferinnen' (using the English word 'Song' rather than the German 'Lied'. Weill explained some time later that he and Brecht had coined the term, which then 'became very popular and was used extensively throughout Germany. It was quite different from 'Lied'. It corresponded, I am supposing, to the American popular song. And while it consisted of four or five verses and a refrain, it did not conform to a specific number of measures as in the case in popular songs do (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1979: 132).

Even if all the solos in *Der Silbersee* are ‘songs’, Weill calls them ‘Lied’, ‘Song’, or ‘Ballade’ according to the situation, and to denote specific feelings or moods. Thus the dramatic significance is enhanced. For instance, he uses the term ‘Lied’ in a paradoxical or ironic manner in order to express the more intimate feelings of a character (see Act 2). Thus the term does not refer in this case to an art song, as in the manner of the nineteenth-century Lied. The ‘Ballade’, as in Fennimore’s ‘Ballade of Caesar’s Death’ (11), is meant to carry a narrative, though musically it is sophisticated, and is often reserved for long critical comments. To return to Act 1 Scene 4: the two Shop Girls’ divided views reflect on the split in society, the waltz-like swing of their duet representing, perhaps, the oscillation between different popular attitudes. This split view is highlighted by the fact that they sing very little in harmony; almost the entire duet is sung in unison. If one considers the analogy given by Kemp, discussed earlier, it is easy to see that these girls too are lower down on the scale of humanity, although they are, it seems more human than the really bad characters. In the example given, it is possible to see Weill’s harmonic, almost ‘tongue-in-cheek’ harmonic writing. Again there is a blur of tonality, while the melodic cells are held together by an ostinato-like bass. Here the ostinato effect in the bass line is created by the waltz-like accompaniment (see Examples 3: Act 1 Scene 4 bars 33-41) (Centennial Anthology 2, 115-116). The next example illustrates the unison between the two melodic lines (see Example 4: Act 1 Scene 4 bars 8-10) (Centennial Anthology 2, 112).



Example 3. The Song of the Two Shop Girls, Act 1 Scene 4, 33-41, showing Weill's typical harmonic language

Example 4. The Song of the Two Shop Girls, Act 1 Scene 4, 8-10, section showing characters singing in unison (very little of the duet is in two-part harmony)

Act 1 Scene, 4, 5 and 6

True to the 'hierarchy of values', the Shop Girls, on the 'lower end of the scale of human affection' (Weill quoted in Kowalke 1986: 137), only sing in duet. The music, marked *Moderato assai*, is somewhat shocking in its use of a sensuous waltz metre (modelled on the popular foxtrot) and its slightly tipsy lilt. The melody is again marked by chromatic falling semitonal intervals and perfect fifths. The orchestral texture is lighter and again

the harmonic language is marked by ambiguity and descending fifths in the bass part. The tonality oscillates between E-flat major and its relative minor throughout the song and does not resolve. Paradoxically, this gives an air of tranquillity that brings out the sense of irony.²⁰

Severin and the gang, who have been watching the girls and who are starved, decide to rob the shop. They hold up the Shop Girls and quickly load articles of food into their rucksacks. After filling his sack, Severin notices a pineapple. In great haste, he chucks everything out of his sack and steals the pineapple. They run off the stage. At this point, the scene changes and we are introduced to Olim and the Fat Policeman. They discuss their jobs, and it is at this point that we discover the meanness of the Fat Policeman: Weill and Kaiser use him to deliver a nasty exposé of the corruption of those who should be law abiding, namely the police (another sneer at the Nazi Storm Troopers).²¹ However, the Shop Girls find the Policemen and report the robbery. Olim and the Fat Policeman see the Gang and Olim fires a shot which, hitting Severin, wounds him in the leg.

At the Police Station Olim is required to write an incident report. He is shocked and confused to see that all that has been stolen is a pineapple. At this point Weill cleverly introduces the idea of melodrama²² as this allows a visible manifestation of Olim's developing humanity. According to Weill's directions, the chorus members are to be dressed in black and perform from the pit or at the side of the stage. Hence the off-stage chorus functions as Olim's conscience and, as he is genuinely concerned, it seems fitting

²⁰ In the Spier production, we had to sing each verse of the song in a 'laid back', casual manner, but as soon as the refrain came, we were directed to run at the audience with huge butcher knives – this created a strangely comical although menacing effect which served to enhance the irony of the scene.

²¹ Due to difficulties in obtaining libretti and translations, and the many versions of the libretto available, I am unable to quote the Fat Policeman's dialogue as the Salter translation on the CD (Capriccio.D-5020) omits this item.

²² Melodrama is a dramatic technique in which spoken words are deliberately scored with musical accompaniment, either as a complete work or as part of an opera. This technique heightens dramatic action. Examples of this occur in J.J.Rousseau (*Pygmalion*, 1762), Georg Benda (*Ariadne auf Naxos*, 1775; *Medea*, 1778). Melodramatic scenes occurring in opera can be found in Cherubini in *Les Deux Journées* (1800), Beethoven in the grave-digging scene in *Fidelio* (1805), and Weber in *Der Freischütz* (1820) (Collins 1976: 349). In *Der Silbersee* Weill uses melodrama as not only a means of adding to the dramatic tension on the stage, but as a means of depicting the character's developing humanity.

that these ‘thoughts’ are sung. Olim ponders the ‘stolen goods’: the pineapple. He questions why a starving man would steal only a pineapple and not something more substantial like bread?

The original audiences would have known the answer to this question. In Europe at this time (1932-33), there were terrible food shortages as a result of the Depression. The Depression affected the German economy particularly badly (at this time more than 6.5 million people were unemployed). Exotic fruit had become unaffordable, and was generally imported from warmer parts of the world. Even under normal circumstances only those in positions of great privilege could afford it and were prepared to pay the inflated prices. Exotic fruit like pineapples, then, were a luxury few could afford. In terms of the drama, the pineapple represents unaffordable luxury, wealth and privilege. Severin’s attempt at stealing it can thus be viewed as his desire for the life that the pineapple symbolizes. Weill and Kaiser infer that Severin has tried to steal that which was not even necessary, an obvious criticism of excess, as the consequence of it is the shooting.

During this melodrama, the chorus (Olim’s conscience) prompts him to think more deeply about the incident and its implications. They ask him if his shooting of Severin is justified: ‘Olim! Olim! Is it nothing to you?’ The chorus probes Olim’s mind in order to discover why Severin would have wanted to steal a pineapple:

Olim: It spreads aroma like a sweet mist – and one is tempted to bite into the juicy middle with all one’s teeth. But dare I? I still ask myself – why didn’t he take more?

Chorus (Sop/Ten): Now you’re on the right track: reflect further! Don’t let your thoughts tire halfway along.

Olim: He attacks a shop full of flour and fat, he can still his hunger for a week – and he pockets a pineapple, which tastes nice but is absolutely no nourishment.

Chorus (Sop/Ten): If you don’t rebuke him, then explore how the present situation came about. Much that is hidden opens up to your thinking if you look.

Olim eventually reasons that Severin cannot be ‘a real robber’, for ‘stealing like this, so contrary to necessity, so stupidly at random’. The contemporary audience would have realized the foolishness of the words ‘so stupidly at random’. It is clear that Severin may not have been quite as stupid as it seemed, and again, a critical comment is levelled at those in positions of privilege. It becomes apparent that the ‘punishment does not fit the crime’.

It is quite clear too that through this exposé of an immoral and inhumane police force, Weill and Kaiser are making an extended point about justice. Again the harmonic vocabulary is typical of Weill’s style. But the chorus is more contrapuntal than usual, representing the ‘polyphonic’ thoughts in Olim’s mind.

At this point in the drama (Act I Scene 6) the Lottery Agent appears. This is the turning-point of the drama. Olim finally decides that if he were able to help Severin, he would.

Suppose I were standing there with my pockets full, I’d go in and carry out my promise. Since I can’t stop every hungry mouth and shall never be powerful enough to force a better world order, though, I’ll dedicate myself to a single one, for whom I don’t need to search long here. My man is marked by a shot. I’d invite him to my home and let him live with me as my brother. If I only had money!

The Lottery Agent suddenly announces that Olim has indeed won a huge sum of money. He advises Olim to concentrate on keeping the money, to invest it and earn money on the interest instead of feeling sorry for those who have none. The Lottery agent persuades him: ‘If you have a heart of flesh, harden it to stone, and don’t be surprised if it doesn’t work at once. Build a tower of hewn stone around you, and you won’t hear the piteous cries of those outside.’ Weill set these words in tango style: another irony, since the tango is a ‘seductive’ dance, and like the other popular dances he uses, well known to the audiences of the time. But its seductiveness almost works: Olim is almost persuaded. Ironically, the nature of the lyrics delivered by this Lottery Agent have similarities to the lyrics of some Nazi SA troops songs (see Chapter 4). In this respect, one might imagine that Weill and Kaiser are deliberately levelling a protest against such inhumane utterances.

The music once again follows a pattern of chromatically descending fifths – harmonically ‘irresolute’ and indicative of Olim’s mood of indecision, a mood underscored by the *Sprechgesang*²³ refrain of this number, where the Lottery Agent asks Olim to imagine how much interest he would accrue. The tango has a neo-impressionistic sound which helps create a languid hedonistic mood signifying the lifestyle the money would offer. The orchestration is colourful and ‘heady’, and is heightened with intoxicating fortissimo dynamics, a full string section (Arco) and sweeping melodic lines in the refrain section. The tango rhythm is emphasized by pizzicato strings and percussion in the bass line (see Example 5) (Kurt Weill Songs, A Centennial Anthology, Vol. 1, Warner Bros: 1999).

Example 5. The Lottery Agent’s Tango, Act 1 Scene 6, 26-35, showing descending sequences of fifths

Olim, not forgetting his promise, and reminded of it by the chorus, decides to help Severin. He tears up the report and redoes it, changing the facts: ‘How can I free Severin from custody? (*He tears up the report*). It was a mistake, a disastrous stray shot. An innocent man was hit. I shall not get over disgrace: I am quitting the service’.

²³ *Sprechgesang* or ‘speech-song’ is a type of voice production midway between song and speech. Other composers such as Humperdinck Königschilder (1897) and Schoenberg *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) have used this technique.

Act 1 Scene 7

Severin is bed in hospital. He hallucinates in his delirious and shocked state about being in a forest full of pineapples. He is filled with joy at finding them, but the pineapples suddenly turn into lanterns which he cannot eat. Again we are alerted to the superficiality of the lifestyle of privilege. Severin tries to eat them, but the juice and pulp taste like nothing. Eventually the pineapples/lanterns catch alight and begin to burn up until nothing is left and Severin is tormented again. The doctor on the case poses the question we should all be asking now ‘What chance do they have, these people?’

Olim – now rich and empowered due to his unexpected win of the lottery – enters the room and takes charge of Severin, promising to feed and care for him in his castle. They sing a duet (this is the first time that Olim sings). Apart from providing comic relief, this moment is the first time Olim has sided with the ‘underprivileged’ Severin, and it marks the beginning of his transformation.

Act 2

Act 2 Scene 1

After the reiteration of the Overture, Fennimore arrives outside the walls of Olim’s castle, to the accompaniment of a short orchestral overture. Frau von Luber (the housekeeper), her aunt who is an aristocrat in ‘reduced circumstances’, has sent for her. Fennimore sings of her fate as a ‘poor relation’, ‘always at others’ ‘beck and call’. As this number is subtitled ‘Lied’, one can expect that it will be more intense, reinforcing Fennimore’s more ‘noble’ role in the opera, a role from which she is qualified to deliver criticism:

I’m only a poor relation and belong to others (ah, if only none of them would bother me! But uncles and aunts do, and nothing I do pleases them). This is no life, only an annoyance that has to be endured, come what may. I have a suitcase-

full of belongings that I drag around everywhere (ah, if only I could get rid of it, because I've chafed my fingers sore and I am also not the strongest!)

As such, this 'Lied' is consistent with Weill's innovation of the 'song' in that it is used as a means of irony. It is also characteristic of Weill's harmonic style. Again, there is a disruption of tonality and one is not sure where the music is going harmonically. At certain points the harmony created between the melodic line and the accompaniment is made more dramatic by clashing unresolved augmented fifths which heighten the irony of Fennimore's words. The 'Lied' has a 'tongue-in-cheek' sound. It is only in the final cadence of the song that there is some sort of harmonic resolution. Also evident in this number is what David Drew has called the Weill '*Ur-motiv*' (Drew quoted in Kowalke 1979: 187): a six-note melodic cell (see Example 6). This is often generated from a sequence of falling fourths or fifths (in this case the soprano melody made up of sequential falling fourths and fifths in bars 10 and 12 from the B flat to the first F of bar 12 which is reminiscent of this *Ur-motiv*), and is a Weill trademark (see Example 7). (Kowalke 1979: 187), (see Examples 6 and 7) (Kurt Weill Songs, A Centennial Anthology, Vol. 1, Warner Bros: 1999).

Fennimore *p*
Ich bin ei-ne ar-me Ver-wand-te und ge -

F. (gesprochen) Ach, wenn sich doch keiner um mich kümmern wollte! *p*
hö-re zu An-der-n da-zu, doch

Example 6. Fennimore's Lied, Act 2 Scene 1, 8-16, again showing Weill's tendency for falling fifths. An outline of the 'Ur-motiv' is present in the melodic line in bars 10-14

Example 7. The Weill 'Ur-motiv' (Kowalke 1979: 187)

Act 2 Scene 2

Fennimore has been sent for by her aunt in order to placate Olim and the ailing Severin. Olim is tormented by the guilt of having wounded Severin and is concealing his true identity as Severin's attacker. It becomes clear, however, that Olim in submitting to these emotions is well on the way to discovering his humanity. The cunning aunt/ Housekeeper (Frau von Luber) does not know the exact details of Severin's attacker, but she suspects that Olim may have something to do with it. Severin is consumed with rage and revenge.

Suddenly, Frau von Luber asks Fennimore if she is able to play a musical instrument. Fennimore replies that she plays the harp. Weill and Kaiser are alluding here to the Old Testament story of David using his harp to sooth Saul. But Fennimore's music has the opposite effect (as we shall see).

It is important to notice the connection between Fennimore and music. Not only does she sing a great deal in the work, but she plays an instrument associated with 'restoration', healing or even the Divine. Weill and Kaiser deliberately draw our attention to this, and we may conclude that this is her means of expressing affection and humanity. Thus it is logical that she should tell Severin about the Silver Lake, helping continue the transformation in both Olim and Severin, and encouraging the reconciliation at the end of the work. Of all the characters, Fennimore is the only character to speak out against oppression.

Act 2 Scene 3

Meanwhile, the doctor tells Olim that Severin is depressed and needs entertainment. Olim is delighted to hear about Frau von Luber's niece Fennimore who is now at the castle and able to play the harp. He is becoming fearful that Severin will discover his real identity. Olim is driven by his need to seek Severin's gratitude to assuage his guilt. He decides to provide a small celebration in the dining room in honour of the healing of Severin's wound. Ironically, the real wound is far from healed, and each time he is reminded of his leg, he becomes more resentful and angry. At the celebration, it is decided that Fennimore will provide the entertainment on her harp. This action all takes place with little music.

Act 2 Scene 4

This is undoubtedly one of the highpoints of the opera – dramatically and musically. Fennimore's song – 'Ballad of Caesar's Death' – comes at a point towards which Weill

and Kaiser have been building tension since the beginning. She is dressed in pink, with almond blossoms in her hair. One expects a song about love, or forgiveness, or something equally sentimental. But we are hit with a powerful satire, driven by military dotted rhythms, describing the downfall of Caesar, who ‘wished to rule by the sword, but a knife laid him low’. This stern warning about the hubris of leadership is such an overt attack on Hitler, and so declamatory in style, that it is not surprising it caused such a furore when it was first heard. Fennimore doesn’t hold back demurely; the ‘strokes on her harp sound like the sharpening of a knife’, as Kemp puts it (quoted in Kowalke 1986: 137).

The rhythm consists of a very marked dotted staccato pattern which is more prominent in the bass. Together with ostinato rolled chords, Weill creates the effect of soldiers marching, a parallel to Nazi propaganda songs. In its musical construction, this Ballade may also be considered an allusion to Eisler’s fighting songs, and although it may seem that it was aimed solely at Hitler, it is clear that it was meant for others too (see Example 8) (Kurt Weill Songs, A Centennial Anthology, Vol. 1, Warner Bros: 1999).

Again the harmony is ambivalent. Instances of progressions moving from the tonic to the supertonic and then to the supertonic of the supertonic are prevalent and convey Caesar’s amazement and shock. The orchestration at this point is heavy, with the strings and piano taking the melody, and a large percussion and woodwind section taking the ostinato rolled chords in the bass, thus dramatizing the sound of the harp. It was after this song was sung that the Nazi troops caused havoc at the second performance of *Der Silbersee* in Magdeburg on the 21 February 1933 resulting in the further banning of shows. This ominous sounding song is an example of Weill at his most dramatic.



Example 8. The Ballad of Caesar's Death, Act 2 Scene 3, 21-24

As far as the plot is concerned, the song backfires: instead of 'entertaining' at the dinner party, Fennimore enrages Frau Von Luber, who was hoping that Olim would be seduced. Olim is embarrassed, as his hopes for gaining Severin's gratitude are confounded and the latter ruminates on the identity of his attacker. In order to set the record straight, Fennimore announces that she is able to do a 'bread roll' dance. However, 'she says that the bread rolls on the table are too round and pointy for her purpose' (quoted in Kowalke 1986: 138); She needs long pointy ones. This 'silly' dialogue changes the sombre mood, and a fruit bowl is brought into the dinning room, containing two bananas and (of course) a pineapple. Fennimore sticks a fork into each banana and begins a 'Banana dance' in the style of a shimmy, a 1920s foxtrot which involves shaking the shoulders. Although 'comic' and even silly on one level, the number is also bizarre and deliberately provocative. Members of the Nazi party in the audience would have found it as insulting as the preceding Ballade. It seems to be saying: 'If you want me to be seductive and provocative, I'll show you!'

The power of the Banana dance depends on its allusion to the 1924 film, *The Gold Rush*, featuring Charlie Chaplin,²⁴ the 'spokesman of the underprivileged' (quoted in Kowalke 1986: 138). In a dream sequence by way of after dinner entertainment (in the movie) Chaplin takes two forks and sticks them into two bread rolls and, using evocative wrist

²⁴ In the Spier production the allusion to Charlie Chaplin and this particular film was made more relevant by having scene changes that were based on Charlie Chaplin's silent movies. Actors were dressed appropriately and performed the same antics to the audience's delight.

movements, performs a dance with forks for legs and bread rolls for boots. The audience of 1933 would have understood the reference immediately. At a superficial level, this allusion to the cinema suggests modern everyday life, but it is the darker association that is more powerful. Another rather playful association, and one that strengthens the links to jazz in *Der Silbersee*, calls up the image of the black jazz dancer and singer, Josephine Baker, who caused a sensation in *Dark Star* in Paris 1926. She was presented dancing on a mirror, wearing only a G-string of bananas.

The ‘Shimmy’, the rhythmic foundation of the Banana dance, uses a repeated two-bar rhythmic pattern, characteristic of Weill. It is again an example of the conflation of two tonalities, ‘the intermixture of E flat and c minor as a double-tonic sonority’ (Kowalke 1979: 301) (see Example 9) (Kowalke 1979: 301).



Example 9. Fennimore’s Banana Dance, Act 2 Scene 3, 192-199, ‘Shimmy’ illustrating a dotted rhythmic cell

‘By using bananas, she [Fennimore] shows, as has Severin with his yearning a pineapple, that she too can make the imaginative leap from a lifestyle associated with bread rolls to a better one’ (quoted in Kowalke 1979: 138). This dance also stirs up Severin’s resentment, as he is reminded by the ‘bananas-cum-boots’ (Ibid) that his own feet cannot function properly. In turn this reminds him of the pineapple, which reminds him of the wound and ultimately of the attacker and all that he has been denied. Finally, Severin savagely

attacks the pineapple in the bowl, stabbing it violently, imagining it to be the body of his attacker:

Severin: It wasn't against the fruit, but him who didn't let me eat it!

Olim: Who here forbids you?

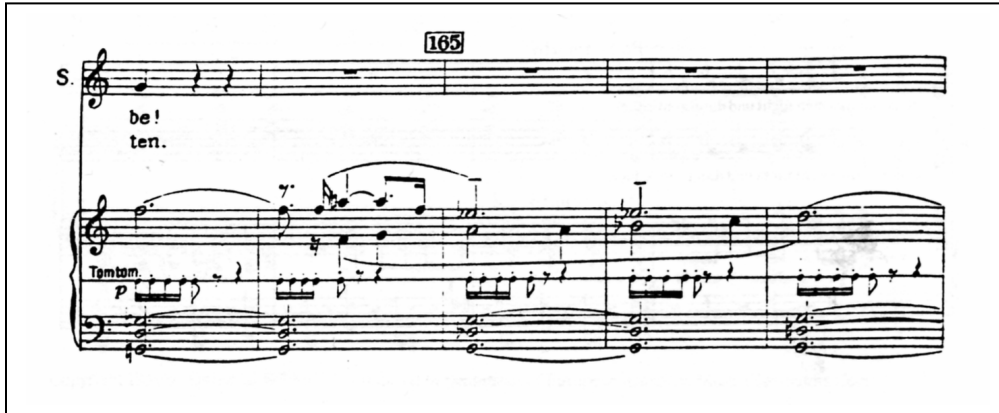
Severin: Once, Olim, permission was shot away at the last moment. I already had the fruit in my possession; a shot rang out, and I could run no more. He should have let me eat the fruit and then not have missed my heart – but he left me lying hungry in my blood, this ten times accursed, inhuman country Policeman!

Act 2 Scene 5

This extraordinary scene has introduced Severin to an ally, Fennimore, and it is through her encouragement that he will discover the identity of his assailant and finally also be able to be reconciled to his fate. Frau von Luber, having used Fennimore for her own malicious purposes – to expose Olim as the attacker and cause mistrust between Severin and Olim – is angered by her song and she dismisses Fennimore from the castle (perhaps this may be a comment on the Nazi style of eliminating competition). Severin tells a worried Olim that he was not attacking the pineapple, but the man who shot him. Severin then sings of his desire for revenge: 'It will not be forgotten or forgiven: a life for a life!' This is repeated over and over in the song against a strong timpani ostinato and heavy brass section (see Example 10). Clearly this is also intended as a message to the Nazis, a protest against the policies which had caused so many Jewish artists, musicians and authors to lose their jobs. Perhaps one day they would see the Nazis and Hitler pay for their policies. Severin's anger comes chillingly close at this point to the violent language of Hitler himself against the Jews:

[T]he lower the intellectual and moral level of [Jewish] art fabricators, the greater his fertility until the rogue like a garbage sorter splashes his fifth in the face of humanity. Just think, for every Goethe, Nature can easily come up with ten thousand such polluters [who] now poison the soul like germ carriers of the worst sort²⁵

²⁵ (<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~german/gtext/kaiserreich/hitler1.html>).



Example 10. Severin's 'Odysseus Song', Act 3 Scene 3, 165-167, an ostinato in the timpani symbolising a death knell

Again, much of this happens without the 'humanising' effect of music. Olim fears for his life and eventually confesses to Frau von Luber that he is Severin's attacker. He explains how he was once a policeman and tells her about the robbery. Olim asks Frau von Luber to 'whisper in his ear' should she find out that Severin has discovered the identity of his attacker. She swears to tell him and promises also that she will never divulge his secret. Again, most of this sequence takes place without music, suggesting that Frau von Luber lacks humanity. Olim asks her to watch Severin and make sure that he does not leave the castle. This is just what Frau von Luber desires. She asks if she can have the keys (the symbol of power) to the castle. Olim gives in to her demand, and by doing so, concedes full power to her. This is a direct allusion to Hitler's seizure of power on 30 January 1933, when Hindenberg made him Chancellor thereby conceding all his power to the Nazis.

Act 2 Scene 6

Severin approaches Fennimore who is about to leave, and asks her to take a message of his whereabouts to his gang in the forest near the silver lake. It is at this point that Weill and Kaiser introduce Fennimore as Severin's 'ally'; through her Severin will learn the identity of his attacker and thus open the way to 'reconciliation'. Kowalke observes at this moment that it is not surprising that Weill should have been stimulated to write some of his finest and most expressive music in *Der Silbersee* (quoted in Kowalke 1986: 138-139). Severin and Fennimore sing a beautiful duet of the path to the silver lake. Almost a 'love duet', it also symbolises the transformation and reconciliation still to come. The orchestration is light, gentle and silvery in sound, the melody outlined by woodwinds accompanied by pizzicato strings. True to the musical model Kemp has identified, (which I have mentioned in this chapter, regarding music and its distribution in the work as a means of dramatising characters humanity), we become aware that the vocal lines of Severin and Fennimore are for the first time in the opera in some sort of diatonic relationship. This implies qualities that define humanity and compassion and express the affection the two characters feel for one another. Here Weill introduces the new melodic material that will be used in the last melodrama of the piece, at the final point of transformation. This duet is loosely based on the foxtrot (see Example 11) (Kowalke 1979: 306)



Example 11. Fennimore and Severin's Duet, Act 2 Scene 6, 23-27. This thematic material foreshadows the last melodrama (2) found in the last scene of the opera

Act 3

Act 3 Scene 1

This act opens with Olim and Frau von Luber on the stairs. Frau von Luber, now ‘in power’, refuses to let Severin see Olim, making Severin very suspicious. Fennimore returns with the gang, who tell him the identity of his attacker. He then confronts Olim, who denies the charge. The chorus reiterates Severin’s revenge song and again the maxim ‘It will not be forgotten or forgiven: a life for a life!’ is forcefully sung, again at a much slower tempo. Olim is plagued once more by his conscience (this reminder is intended for the audience too). Hiding from Severin in a room in the tower he is discovered by Frau von Luber. In return for help and food, she persuades him to sign his castle over to her. Olim, now no longer afraid, asks Frau von Luber to let him out of the tower, but she refuses to give him the keys.

Act 3 Scene 3

Severin, who is in the cellar, has persuaded the gang to chain him up – he is determined to stay bound until the desire for revenge has left him. Here Weill and Kaiser are purposely protesting against violence as a means of solving difference: the Nazis seemed to settle every difference of opinion with force, as with their behaviour at the performances of both *Aufstieg* and *Die Bürgschaft*.

Again the orchestra sounds a death knell on the timpani, the solo oboe has the melodic line and is accompanied by a muted string section. It is through transparent orchestration such as this that Weill achieves the ‘clarity’ he mentioned in ‘Der Neue Oper’.

Severin, tormented by his emotions and desire for revenge, likens himself to Odysseus. Odysseus tied himself to the mast of his ship in order to stop himself from falling prey to the temptation of the sirens. The song describes his sadness and the senselessness of his predicament through the use of ostinato percussion rhythmic cells and harmonic pedal

points in the bass. Severin's dilemma has excited a strong musical response from Weill. The dissonant melodic intervals in the opening bars of the song, scored for oboe and taken over by voice, create the illusion of twelve-tone music.

Symbolising his victory over his emotions, Severin's chains fall away – audible in the orchestration by means of several abrupt, accented chords. Frau von Luber, still hoping for the worst, tells Severin where Olim is hiding. Severin explains to her that he no longer desires revenge. Enraged, and revealing the full extent of her malice, she locks him in the cellar in order to prevent him telling Olim that he has forgiven him.

Act 3 Scene 4

It seems at this point that the 'evil' characters have won. The orchestra plays an interlude of wild abandon, setting up the scene. A large brass and percussion section plays music based on the duet of Frau von Luber and Baron Laur. Weill's recycling of material accords with the 'hierarchy of values' discussed earlier: it seems logical that these 'evil' characters should have no musical variety. Frau von Luber celebrates the success of her scheming with her odious friend Baron von Laur in a duet sung in unison. In order to suggest brazenness and recklessness, Weill has purposely created an 'out-of-sync' effect in the metre of the piece: the connection between harmony and rhythm is delayed, as if the bass part is lagging behind. This is emphasised by rhythmical accents (see Example 12) (Kurt Weill Songs, A Centennial Anthology, Vol. 1, Warner Bros: 1999).



Example 12. The duet of Baron Laur and Frau von Luber, Act 3 Scene 4, 1-9

The table on stage is overloaded with deserts and wine bottles. Fennimore sits in the background. Rolling about in paroxysms of laughter, the Baron asks Frau von Luber to recall the events of the past few hours and tell how she has managed to swindle Olim out of the keys to the castle and to lock him in the tower. Note that Frau von Luber and Baron Laur should be played by good comic actors. The actors are not required to sing particularly well – in fact the more shrill and ugly their voices, the more effective the scene. In the hierarchy of singing, they are at the bottom of the list: devoid of humanity or the ability to feel affection, they are characterised as fools, in a fool's paradise:

(Frau von Luber/Baron Laur): Don't lift a finger, as in the land of Cockaigne. We wait until night darkens, when everything that's tired and no longer able to raise even the littlest finger is asleep.

Then we move our hand again, as in the land of Cockaigne, the fools' paradise. What tastes good lies on our table: wherever it comes from, and how it's obtained, it is obtained, it is; and even what has corners rolls. We scarcely wave a hand, as in the fool's paradise. The land of Cockaigne, where one gorges mightily and doesn't miss an opportunity where greed reigns in abundance, still exists. The right hand replenishes the left, as in the fool's paradise.

Meantime Fennimore steals the keys from Frau von Luber and releases Olim and Severin. The Baron blackmails Olim for having shielded a robber from persecution. Severin and

Olim, who have now reconciled their differences are expelled from the castle together, and leave with Fennimore.

Act 3 Scene 6

In this last scene, designed as a 'scena and aria' (Kowalke 1986: 139), Weill uses the technique of melodrama in order to portray the final transformation of the inner conflict in the two characters. Severin and Olim imagine their last journey together, the waters of the silver lake where they expect to meet death. But now united, they no longer fear their emotions. They offer some insightful advice about fear and anger: 'They are the two emotions that cause misery. Anger attacks, fear flees. But men must neither attack nor flee: They must meet half way and step towards one another on smooth level ground'. Together they make their way towards the silver lake, which represents this 'level ground'. The music starts with a chorale accompanied by shivering tremolando lines. A chorale is traditionally an expression of communal (Christian) faith, and its use here 'is a kind of benediction', as Kemp puts it (Ibid.). It is sung here by an off-stage chorus 'on the right side of sentimentality' (Ibid.) in face of the imminent death of the two protagonists.

The melodrama brings the first truly resolved cadence in the entire work, symbolic of the reconciliation we are witnessing. But suddenly there is a violent storm, which sweeps away the snow. Spring is revealed: a symbol of Olim's transformed character.

The second part of this scene is in an open-ended ABC form. The introductory melodrama is a transformation of the 'melodic seed', as Kemp describes it (Kowalke 1986: 139), of the previous melodrama. Here, the melodic material first used in Act 2 Scene 12 (Severin and Fennimore's duet) is revived, reminding the audience of Fennimore's encouraging words about the silver lake: 'I will not be shaken by any anxieties and shall step on the lake as if [it] were a board. The silver lake will support anyone who has to go further.' The chorus part is a variant of the earlier melody too. It is the voice of Fennimore, also heard from back stage, which then introduces the new

thematic material. Fennimore, the agent of reconciliation, has now completed her mission; as the moment is finally one of ‘revelation’ (Kemp in Kowalke 1986: 139).

Astonishingly, the lake freezes. Olim and Severin are able to walk on its waters. Their journey is near completion. Fennimore’s voice is heard singing: ‘All that exists is a beginning and disappears again into time, as the horrors of night pass into the beginning of brightness’ (see Example 13) (Kowalke 1986: 145).



Example 13. Melodrama (2); Severin and Olim’s wonder at the miracle of the frozen lake, Act 3 Scene 5, 12-15

Finally, we are witness to the transformation in Olim, which Kaiser felt was the ‘true nature’ of man but dangerously subversive. This final symbol of reconciliation must particularly have angered the Nazis: it was expressed artistically by a Jew, used the vehicle of the protest chorale to voice the will of the people, and concluded with Fennimore (the woman who is prepared to sacrifice herself for others’ redemption) singing what sounds uncannily like a paraphrase of the end of Goethe’s *Faust*:

All things corruptible
Are but a parable;
Earth’s insufficiency
Here the ineffable
Wins life through love;
Eternal Womanhood
Leads us above

(Goethe 1965: 288).

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion: The Message of *Der Silbersee*

Der Silbersee is Kaiser's vision of man, a 'clear sighted conviction that mankind's true nature had yet to emerge' (quoted in Heinzelmann 1990: 18). The (humanly flawed) characters in the opera finally overcome their limitations, realise their true nature, and are able to walk over 'water'. The message of *Der Silbersee*, notwithstanding its political impact in every detail, is also a universal one. It is debatable whether Weill and Kaiser realised the full extent of the irony of producing such a message in the face of overwhelming totalitarianism. The message of 'humanity conquers all' seems sentimental, almost trivial, in the face of the years of devastation to come in the Europe of the 1930s and early 40s.

Perhaps, therefore, the opera should also be considered an allegory, a 'fairy-tale' as Kemp puts it, like Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* or Strauss's *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, or a 'modern' journey of self-discovery. Kemp raises the question as to why, given Weill's beliefs about the role of modern opera and his opposition 'to fantasy and symbolism' (quoted in Kowalke 1986:131), he might have wanted to create a fairy-tale. Kemp goes on to answer his own question by observing that the idiom helps Weill combine popular appeal with social commentary. Perhaps, too, the title was a deflection, diverting the authorities' attention away from the serious, life-and-death issues the work deals with; the medium helps to heighten the ironic quality of the whole work, Kemp suggests. The subtitle '*A Winter's Tale*' alludes more directly to the harsh winter of 1932-33, the 'Christmas of Hunger', as it was called, when millions of Germans faced food and fuel shortages. Heinzelmann sums up the metaphor the title would have created for audiences in the following way:

That fateful winter of 1932/33 is mirrored for us more closely in *Der Silbersee* than in historical descriptions and other literary representations. The history of its origin and performance is itself nothing short of a parable of that dark beginning of the winter in Germany, precisely because Weill himself obviously did not

realise, or did not want to realise, the significance of Hitler's seizure of power (Heinzelmann 1990: 19).

Kemp suggests that the title may be an allusion to *Der Schatz im Silbersee* (The Treasure in the Silver Lake), a story written by the popular German writer Karl May (1842- 1912). The genre of May's preference was the American 'Western', and Kemp argues that Kaiser may also be

Exploiting the vogue for all things American in the Weimar Republic – and provid[ing] German expansionist instincts with much to feed on: romanticized descriptions of the Wild West, continuous action (especially the gratuitously violent), struggles for power and wealth in which the only 'good guys' among white men are Germans, who alone can draw out the nobility of the Indians. Hitler regarded May very highly. The treasure of *Der Schatz im Silbersee* is both mythical, and real (quoted in Kowalke 1986: 134).

Kemp goes on to say that the title *Der Silbersee* is also an allusion to 'Heine's bitterest commentary on Germany entitled *Deutschland: Ein Wintermärchen* (Germany: A Winter's Tale)' (Ibid.). Of course it is also a reference to William Shakespeare's tragedy *A Winter's Tale* which, like *Der Silbersee*, sets gross inhumanity against a miraculous fantasy' (Ibid.). It may perhaps be no coincidence that the work's subtitle carries such significant literary relevance. Certainly the allusion to its nature as a 'miraculous fantasy' can only be regarded as 'intentional' (quoted in Kowalke 1986:134).

In order to substantiate his argument that Weill had reasons for reverting to the 'myth' or 'fairy-tale', Kemp observes in this same article – 'Music as Metaphor: *Der Silbersee*' – that it is indeed possible to identify elements of the magical and fantastical in the work. He notes that the forest, castle, banquet and ball, miracle, fairy godmother, evil witch and the happy ending are all present in *Der Silbersee* to some extent. In fact, Kemp refers to *Der Silbersee* as 'an upside-down fairy-tale', in which 'all is put right at the end with that extraordinary twist where the hero and the policeman are redeemed by the kiss of the princess or, here, the voice of the anima' (quoted in Kowalke 1986:131). He suggests that, like Cinderella, Severin is unemployed, starving and exploited, 'his image of transcendent beauty is not a princess but a pineapple' (Ibid.). Severin in desperation steals the pineapple and is 'wounded not by a spindle' but by Olim's bullet. The 'good

fairy', Olim, who has 'miraculously won his riches in the lottery', helps the hero, Severin, 'recuperate in his castle'. Kemp contends that it is 'not the stillness of sleep which helps restore him but, in vengeance, he masters his emotions and obtains reconciliation'. The 'wicked witch', Frau Von Luber 'is a loathsome fascist who swindles the riches and castle away from Olim'. Finally, in true fairy-tale fashion, 'all is set right in the end when the hero, Severin and Olim, the former policeman are redeemed by the kiss of a princess – the voice of Fennimore' (quoted in Kowalke 1986:131).

However, Heinzelmann suggests that it seems more likely that the work can be seen as an allegory of mankind in which the 'spiritual' journey of the two main characters, Severin and Olim, is symbolized. Severin symbolises the many unemployed and starving Germans; he is a spokesman for the underprivileged. Seeking better material conditions, the unemployed (Severin and the gang) 'who can only symbolically bury hunger, and who ultimately silence it by raiding a shop overflowing with goods, stand for the then six millions who were out of work' (Heinzelmann 1990:19). Heinzelmann suggests that the 'petty minded policeman Olim, who in protecting his property', shoots his 'fellow man', Severin, and then realises his 'mistake' and wishes to make 'amends' for his wrong, 'definitely stands for the majority of Socialists, the SPD, who – in the author's vision – finally ally themselves with the representative of the revolutionary Socialists', namely Severin. The two are then expelled from the collective house (the political system) 'in which the old powers' now 'spread themselves in comfort' in a fool's paradise (Heinzelmann 1990:19). The pineapple typifies luxury and extravagance. The freezing of the silver lake becomes the 'crystallisation of informed hope', which is a symbol of their 'self-immolation' and regeneration (Heinzelmann 1990: 19). Heinzelmann concludes that this self-immolation of the 'two then underdogs' is one of Kaiser's 'dialectic symbols' (Heinzelmann 1990: 19).

In light of the symbolic nature of the work, *Der Silbersee* does present 'real situations' in which 'men have to make up their minds' and abide by these decisions. Olim has to abide by his decision to help Severin and Severin, in his desire to find the Silver Lake, abides by his decision not to seek revenge. By adhering to their individual resolves, they are

ultimately able to attain this ‘informed hope’ and transformation in order for their ‘true natures’ to appear. The equation of Caesar with Hitler is fitting, as the ‘fascist would-be-despot’ (Heinzelmann 1990:19). Kaiser is also perhaps presenting a warning that representatives of the established order (such as Frau von Luber and Baron Laur) are making decisions that will determine their situation to remain in a ‘fools’ paradise’.

Whatever its shortcomings, *Der Silbersee* remains topical on many a level. It also fulfilled Weill’s desire to portray the problems of ‘today’s experience’. However we interpret its original concerns and its reception through seventy years, it remains an expression of the ‘ways of human behaviour’, as Weill himself put it (Ibid.).

In this concluding chapter I sum up my investigation of *Der Silbersee* both as a protest against conservative operatic conventions and as a protest against the political practices in Germany of 1933. I suggest that it embodies an important reason for the discontinuation of Weill’s so – called ‘German’ style which ‘died’ when he was forced to leave Germany in 1933. Finally I debate the untimely disappearance of this interesting work from the modern opera repertoire.

As a work by a German Jewish modernist composer of this period, *Der Silbersee* has particular relevance and yet is known to very few regular opera audiences. It certainly deserves more attention than it has been given, especially in the context of the Nazi era.

Nazi Reaction to *Der Silbersee*

In asking why this work has been so neglected, two reasons seem most likely, namely the politics of the time, and the closure of its premier run. Nazi troops provoked tumult at the second performance on the 21 February 1933 in Magdeburg, as I have already recounted in an earlier chapter. The bile that Weill’s piece produced from its detractors is evident in a review by F. A. Hauptmann printed in the Nazi newspaper the *Völkischer Beobachter* on 24 February 1933.

Such a composer must be viewed with suspicion, all the more when he, as a Jew, takes the liberty of using a German opera stage for his un-racial purposes. The music to *Der Silbersee* demonstrates that this mistrust was justified. It is a matter of a number of orchestral preludes and interludes which by their rhythms seek, not entirely unsuccessfully, to whip forward the insignificant action, of mystifyingly goading and prophetic, ultimately even ‘appeasing’ choruses, and of a number of partly silly, partly impudent ‘songs’, performed almost throughout in a monotonous, expressionless speech-song; only through the often obtrusive orchestral accompaniment is there a hint that it is a question of ‘music’. It makes no difference that in his musical expression here Weill shows himself moderate, as compared to his earlier concoctions, that the 16 ‘numbers’, some of which were cut, avoid the jazz form, and that even occasional touches of euphony, of melody (the trumpet in the introduction) or astonishing resolutions are found – it depends on the spirit and the intention. The spirit, however, is snobbish, the intention speculative! There is nothing strong in this music, nothing that could justify the expenditure. Unlovely and sick – these are the hallmarks (Quoted in Heinzelmann 1990: 27).

The Nazis would have viewed this work from their leader’s point of view, that all Jews were Marxists if not communists: therefore Weill daring to criticise automatically made him a Marxist. An excerpt from Hitler’s own document on ‘The Jewish Question’ (see also Chapter 5) further elucidates the Nazi reception of the work, both as a site of Jewish decadence and Marxist propaganda:

The Jewish doctrine of Marxism rejects the aristocratic principle of Nature and sets in its place the eternal privilege of power and strength of the mass and the dead weight of its numbers. It therefore denies the value of the human personality, contests the significance of nationality and race, and therewith withdraws from humanity the basis of its existence and culture. As a foundation of the universe this [doctrine] would bring about the end of any intellectually comprehensible order. And thus as in this the greatest recognisable organism, the realisation of such a law could result only in chaos and, ultimately, death for the inhabitants of this planet. If the Jew with the help of his Marxist creed is victorious over the peoples of this world, then his crown will be the funeral wreath of humanity²⁶

With its ‘un-racial’ references to mankind and its recognition of the equality of all men willing to make the effort to find their ‘true nature’, *Der Silbersee*, instead of being heralded as the humanitarian fable it was designed to be, was received as yet another Jewish, Marxist threat to German society.

²⁶ (<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~german/gtext/kaiserreich/hitler1.html>)

Given the hindsight provided by history and the unfolding of anti-Semitism, Hitler's comments on Marxism and Weill's Jewish background spell out a grim prophecy. However, Kaiser's comment made in relation to *Der Silbersee* that 'art does indeed live longer than all politics' is true too, if somewhat ironic in the case of this particular work. As 'Protest opera', *Der Silbersee* deals with issues to do with humanity, issues which are no less relevant in the modern world than they were in the Germany of Weill's observing; humanity is still beset by grossly inhuman attitudes, attitudes which are foregrounded in the 'strange tale' told in *Der Silbersee*.

So began the events which were to determine the future of Weill and Kaiser's careers. On the 27 of February that year a week or so after the first performances of *Der Silbersee*, the Reichstag fire broke out; the Nazis persecuted the Marxists and blamed them for arson. A wave of terror and unrest swept through Germany: 4 March 1933 saw the Reichstag elections and an absolute majority for the Nazi Party. Further performances of *Der Silbersee* were cancelled. On the 11 March 1933, Gustav Brecher was relieved of his post by Carl Goerdeler, the Mayor of Leipzig. On the 21 March 1933, the 'day of Potsdam', Weill finally left Germany for Paris by car. He was accompanied by Caspar and Erika Neher. As mentioned in Chapter 2, his wife Lotte Lenya, then divorced from him, later joined him in Paris. The original *Kiepenhaeuer* edition of Kaiser's play (an almost line-for-line replica of the libretto of *Der Silbersee*) was burnt on 10 May 1933 in a fascist book burning in which the Nazis burnt many scores and literary works which they considered to be offensive.

In September 1933 the Nazis began formally reorganising music by establishing the RMK and RMS²⁷ under the leadership of Goebbels. A final successful Concert performance of the songs of *Der Silbersee* took place in Paris on 26 November 1933. They were conducted by Maurice de Abravanel. They were followed shortly after by the final rejection of Kurt Weill at this performance. Florent Schmitt publicly denounced the composer and concluded this unfortunate mockery by demonstrating the Hitler salute. In

²⁷ RMK: Reichsmusikkammer. (Reich Music Chamber), RMS: Reichsmusikerschaft. (Musicians within the Reich Music Chamber).

1936, under the orders of Goebbels, Herbert Gerigk co-edited the document *Dictionary of Jews in Music*. Many Jewish musicians such as Fritz Kreisler, conductors such as the great Bruno Walter and opera directors like Otto Klemperer were laid off. The National Socialist Symphony Orchestra was established in 1937. Gestapo troops invaded the German offices of Universal Edition and by May 1938, posters and brochures were exhibited at the 'degenerate music' exhibit in Düsseldorf. It seems that the immediate circumstances surrounding *Der Silbersee's* banning caused quite a sensation. However, these circumstances overshadowed the work itself. *Der Silbersee's* demise can certainly in part be attributed to its unfortunate history; its neglect to a genuine lack of knowledge of its existence, especially since Weill never promoted it again. The work is, however, of value academically and in terms of its performability. It also has a universality and relevance to audiences today that makes it 'immortal'.

The South African Performance

When the work was performed in South Africa in 2001, it was produced in order to reflect the recent history of South Africa rather than the history of 1930s Germany (see Appendix for illustrations of past performances). It thus became even more strongly a 'protest opera', in this version when it was set in the suburbs and townships of Cape Town. The underdog characters such as Severin and the Lads were played by black actors while the reformed Olim was played by a white Afrikaans actor. Fennimore was played by a white singer, who perhaps represented white liberal thinkers like Nadine Gordimer or Helen Suzman. The Shop Girls became a symbol of the ignorant South African middle classes, the crass and thuggish Fat Policeman and the evil manipulative Frau von Luber obviously reflected 'the State'.

As the work is essentially about reconciliation, this element transferred beautifully onto South Africa's own 'truth and reconciliation' process in the mid-1990s. Essentially, the work then became symbolic of our own journey of self-discovery and was immensely moving to both audiences and members of the cast. In essence, it became *our* transformation, and its haunting melodies took on a relevance that one can only describe

in Kaiser's words as 'splendid' and 'immortal'. *Der Silbersee* certainly demonstrated that it had a universality and relevance that had outlived its historical origins.

We may never know Weill's exact reasons for his apparent abandonment of this work. Perhaps the memories it conjured up were too painful, or he had no need to fight any more. It is mainly due to the dedication of his wife Lotte Lenya after his death that many of these German works (apart from *Die Dreigroschenoper*, which was his only German work successfully staged in the US) have survived at all. After Kurt Weill's death in 1950, Lenya dedicated herself almost entirely to the collection, preservation and recording of most of Weill's music. She realised the importance of her task:

It's been five weeks now since Kurt passed away and I haven't been able to take one step forward. The only thing that keeps me going at all is his music, and the only desire I still retain – everything I have learned through him in these twenty-five years – is to fight for his music, to keep it alive, to do everything within my power for it. Only a few recognise his importance, especially here, where only a part of his work is known. And I believe that I'll find my life's mission in making this music known. Everything is still very hazy, and I don't know yet where to begin ... Again and again I'm reminded of the last lines in *Der Silbersee*: “*Wer weiter muss, den trägt der Silbersee*” [whoever must go on will be carried by the Silver Lake] ... I hope that I'm choosing the right path by going on living for him, so he won't be forgotten too quickly within a time that has no time to remember what happened yesterday (quoted in Symonette and Kowalke 1996: 484).

APPENDIX

Dive into The Silver Lake

The production of famed German composer Kurt Weill's opera-drama *The Silver Lake*, now at the Spier Festival, will be the most important South African musical event this year. While Weill's music has not enjoyed much exposure here, his international stature as a pivotal composer of the 20th century has increased considerably in the past 50 years.

The centenary of his birth in 1900 is now being celebrated internationally. The subject matter and appeal of *The Silver Lake* is universal, as Weill speaks for the entire past century, the social upheavals and spiritual turmoil, much of which is still with us and reflected in his music.

Weill is forever coupled with the poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht as a result of their famous collaboration. Their production of *Dreigroschenoper* (Threepenny Opera) in 1927 took Europe by storm and spawned many imitations. However, prior to this collaboration, Weill had already established himself as one of the leaders of the "new music" in Europe during the 1920s.

Barely 27 by the time he met Brecht, Weill had already completed string quartets, orchestral and choral works, a violin concerto, song cycles and three operas.

His music became the target of Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels and his Stormtroopers, not only because of Weill's Jewish origin but also because the works reflected critical anti-totalitarian, anti-capitalist and pacifist viewpoints. Weill would never forget attending a Nazi mass rally in Augsburg, his birthplace, in 1930 and hearing Hitler refer to him, Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann as "alien influences rampant in Germany" which the Führer promised to root out. Fearing recognition, Weill quietly slipped away.

There is a Kurt Weill style and *The Silver Lake* is a compendium

of his musical stylistic features, begun in the seminal works of the 1920s. The opera-drama incorporates recitatives, polyphonic choruses, heroic vocal style and elaborate instrumentation contrasted with the simpler songs for which Weill became famous.

He vigorously opposed the establishment opera status quo of his day. Throughout his works he uses modern jazzy dance idioms – tangos, foxtrots, waltzes, quick-steps and blues rhythms fill his scores.

The original *Der Silbersee* was a play in three acts with 16 musical numbers and lasted three-and-a-half hours. The English version by Hugh Wheeler was made in 1980 and reduced the opera to two hours, two acts, and incorporated music of other works by Weill.

It was successfully staged in 1980 by the New York City Opera to critical acclaim. While this version may not represent the original 1933 production, it will at least whet our appetite and expose us to Weill's music.

Visiting British satirist/broadcaster/linguist Rory Bremner translated the current Spier version.

Before 1933, Weill's collaborator on *Der Silbersee*, George Kaiser, was considered the most important German playwright. He had written more than 50 plays and much poetry and was considered the leading exponent of dramatic expressionism. He had influenced many playwrights, including Brecht.

Outside Germany, however, his plays are seldom performed today.

The premiere of *Der Silbersee* took place simultaneously on February 18, 1933, in Leipzig, Magdeburg and Erfurt. On February 27 the Reichstag was burnt down and a witchhunt followed. All Weill's music was almost immediately banned in Germany until 1945.

Before this the Nazis had already been inciting riots at performances of *Der Silbersee*. Warned of imminent arrest, Weill and his wife, Lotte Lenya, fled to Paris just hours ahead of the stormtroopers.

The basic plot of *Silver Lake*, subtitled *A Winter's Tale*, holds many parallels for South Africa. The story takes place during times of social upheaval.

Unemployment is rampant, and the *Silver Lake* location consists of a huge shanty town. Corruption and mistrust are the order of the day. People are forced to steal in order to survive.

An instant millionaire is created when the lottery agent arrives to tell the main character Olim, a police man, that he has won.

While the South African connection with Weill's music is tenuous, significantly the last work he completed before he died in 1950 was *Lost in the Stars*, a musical drama version of Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*.

Some of his songs have regularly been sung by Danielle Pascal. Amanda Strydom and others. *Lost in the Stars* had its South African premiere in Benoni in 1966. UCT's College of Music staged the *Mahagonny* song-spiel and the American folk opera *Down the Valley* some years ago, and not much more Weill after that.

Music lovers are in for a treat at Spier's production of *Silver Lake* which opened this week. Weill's music has survived, and will continue to do so, because it transmits timeless issues of concern.

Figure 1. Notice of the Spier production of *The Silver Lake*, Cape Argus, February 24/25, A. Thomas, 2001

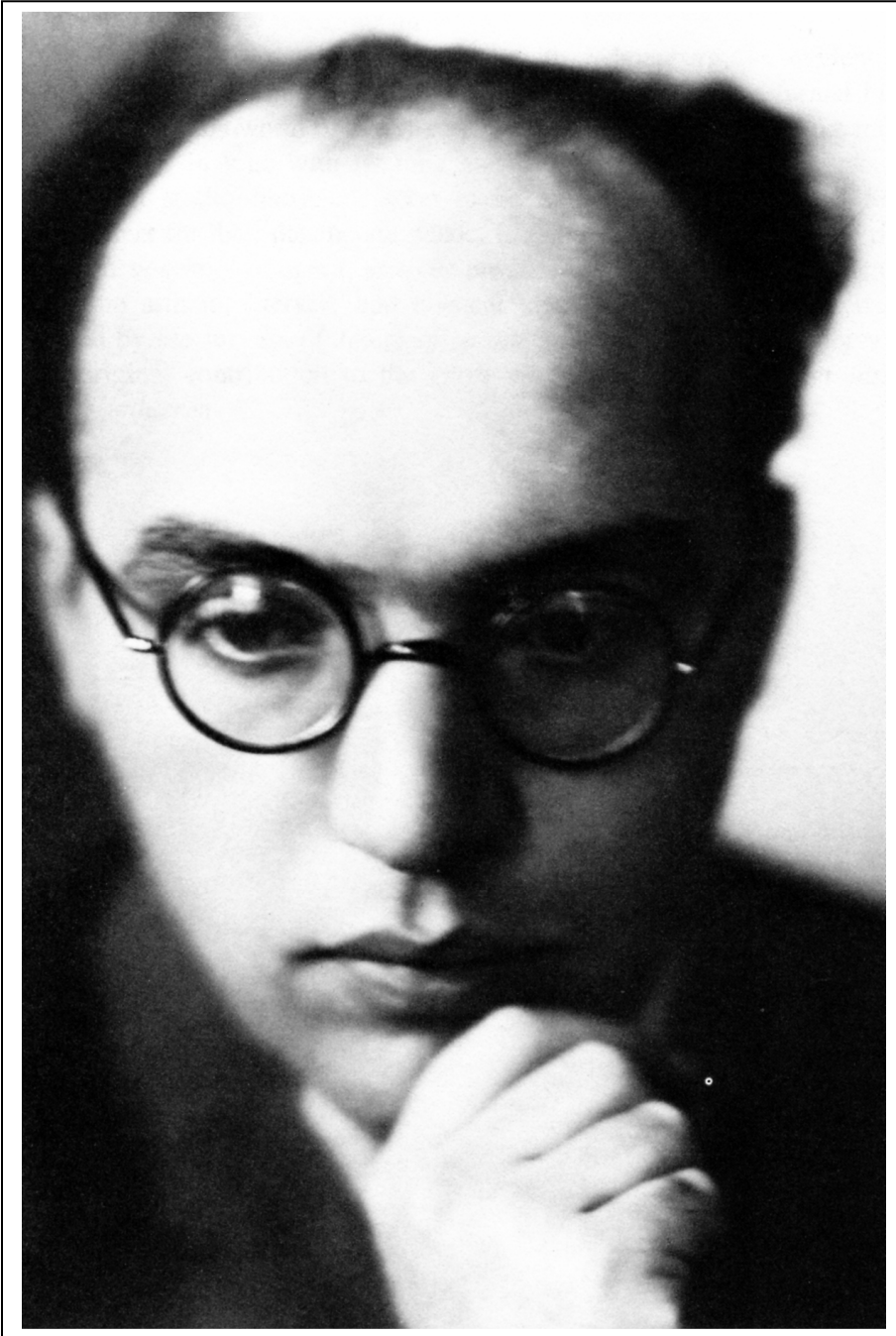


Figure 2. Kurt Weill in 1928 (Cook 198: 116)

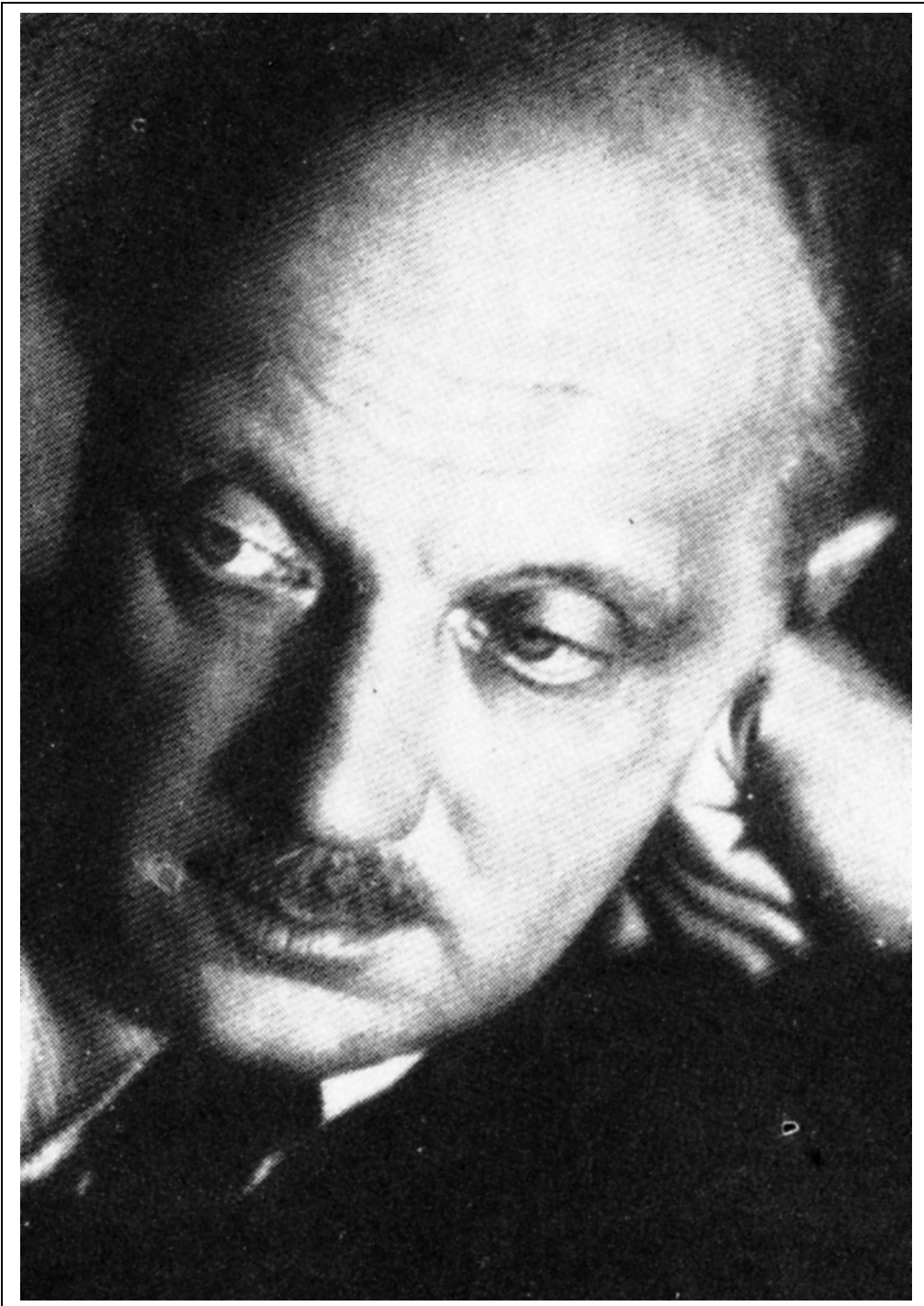


Figure 3. Georg Kaiser in 1932 (Heinzelmann 1990: 31)

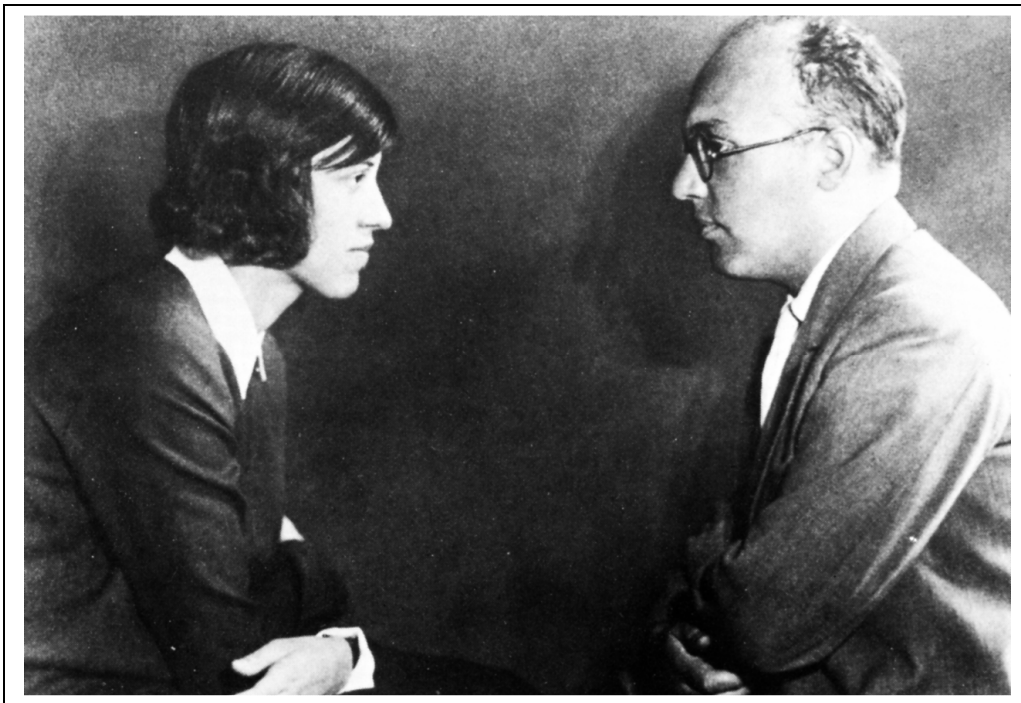


Figure 4. Kurt Weill and his wife Lotte Lenya in 1929 (Jarman 1982: 33)

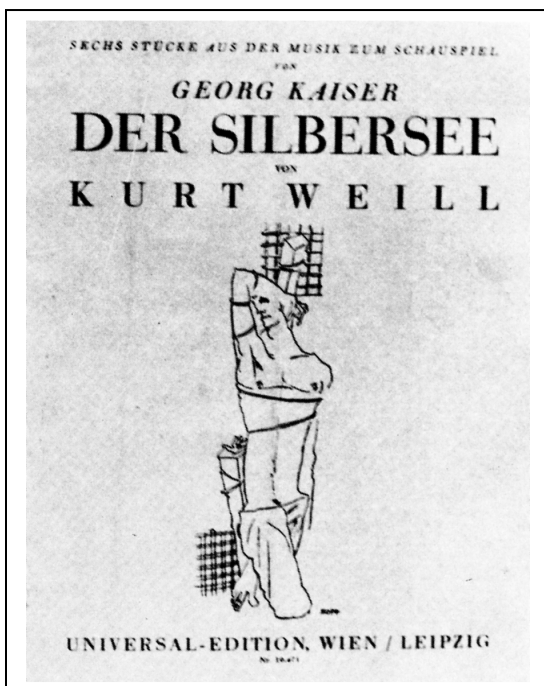


Figure 5. Last edition of *Six Pieces from Silver Sea Music* in February 1933 with cover painting by Max Oppenheimer. This contained six pieces from *Der Silbersee* (Heinzelmann 1990: 35)

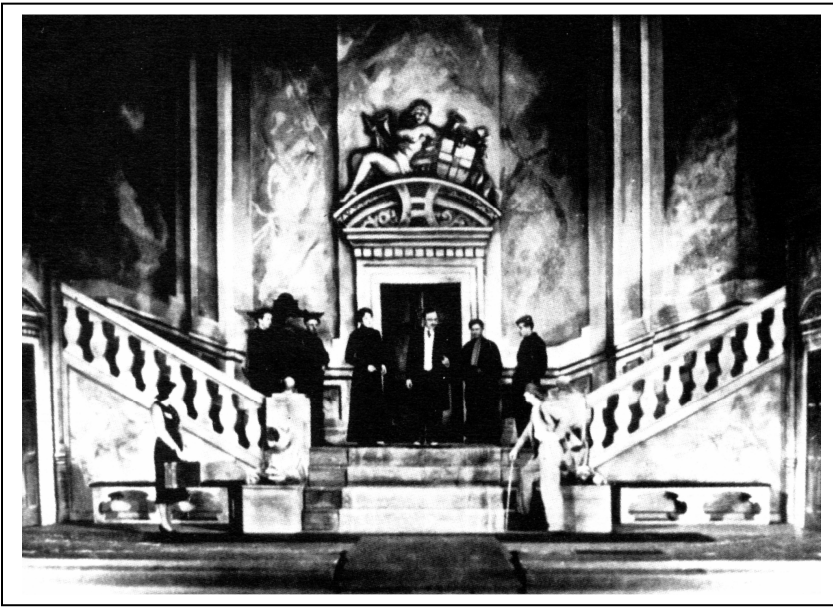


Figure 6. Olim's Castle in the original production of *Der Silbersee*, 1933 (Kurt Weill Songs, A Centennial Anthology, Vol. 2, 1999: 117)



Figure 7. Scene from the Magdeburg première on February 18^t, 1933 with Ernst Busch as Severin (Heinzelmann 1990: 34)



Figure 8. Original recordings of the première of *Der Silbersee*, two songs sung by Ernst Busch and conducted by Weill's pupil Maurice de Abravanel (Heinzelmann 1990: 36)



Figure 9. Onlookers cheering Nazis as they drive through the streets of Berlin in 1929 (Jarman 1982: 63)



Figure 10. (Left) Nazis collecting copies of works by ‘blacklisted’ authors for a public book burning that took place in Berlin in 1933. (Right) Placards encouraging Germans to boycott Jewish businesses as part of a Nazi anti-Semitic campaign in 1932 (Jarman 1982: 64)



Figure 11. German Army (Meyer 1993: 421)

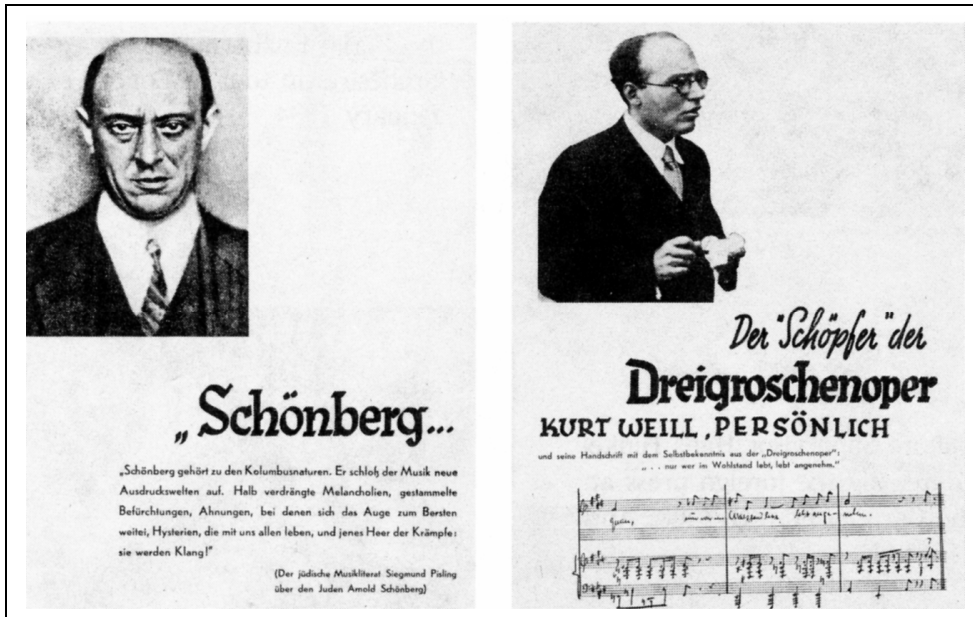


Figure 12. Posters of Arnold Schoenberg and Kurt Weill as ‘degenerate music’ exhibit items, May 1938 (Meyer 1993: 428)



Figure 13. A poster depicting a caricature of Ernst Krenek’s *Jonny* in the ‘degenerate music’ exhibition, May 1938 (Meyer 1993: 428)



Figure 14. Some of the cast members of the Spier production of *The Silver Lake*, 2001. (Back left to right) Helen Burger (Lottery Agent), Pauline du Plessis (Fennimore), Minette du Toit (Shop Girl 2). (Front left to right) Sam Goosen (Fat Policewoman), Buffy Davis (Frau von Luber), Kate Wilmot (Shop Girl 1)

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