

Weill the music lasts

This is my first post here - and it's all about Kurt Weill, who to me is the composer of the moment. Here is a longer version of my article that appeared in the Sunday Times on 15 February.

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Kurt Weill in Berlin 1929 (photo: Thiele, sourced from Kurt Weill Foundation for Music website)

Would the real Kurt Weill please stand up? From the Weimar Republic to Broadway, the composer of biting political satire, more than two dozen stage works and matchless cabaret songs aimed straight for the pulse of his changing times and, chameleon-like, adapted to them. Even though he died in 1950, it almost seems he could detect ours as well.

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This month English National Opera stages its first production in over 30 years of *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, by Weill and Bertolt Brecht. Premiered in 1930 amid the ferment of the financial crash and the rise of the Nazis, it depicts a city dedicated to hedonism that careers into a dystopian hellscape. The leading lady is a sex worker, Jenny (sung at ENO by Danielle de Niese); her lover is executed for the crime of having no money.

The Nazis labelled Weill's music 'entartete', 'decadent', the term plastered on artists who were Jewish, Black, gay, left-wing, experimental or jazzy. But in *Mahagonny*, Weill and Brecht – one Jewish, one a socialist and both jazzy experimentalists – stared the Nazis' depraved cruelty in the face and called it out.

At ENO, the young Olivier Award-nominated director Jamie Manton is bringing *Mahagonny* up to date, drawing on inspirations from Bonnie Blue downwards. It spotlights, he says, 'part of humanity we see in certain leaders now, with violence, oppression and abuse of power, with people who think they can get away with debauchery, and with an inability to escape. *Mahagonny* shows us a lunacy, a state of "carnival" where people aren't held to account.' It has never been more relevant: 'You look at the Epstein Files, and you think, "Oh my God..."'

Manton is part of a new generation of artists currently making Weill their own. It's not before time; but for Lenya's devoted efforts, his music might have faded from view after his death. Further champions included Leonard Bernstein, who conducted *The Threepenny Opera* in 1952, and David Bowie who in 1980 released *Mahagonny*'s hit 'Alabama Song'. A 1988 album by the smoky-voiced Ute Lemper accelerated a revival of interest. But as Lenya once said, "'September Song"' and "'Mack the Knife"' don't begin to tell the whole story.'

Here is an extract from the 1931 movie of *The Threepenny Opera* (fun fact: Bartók's librettist for *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, Bela Balász, was involved in filming it)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMWc4h77e2o>

Weill was born in 1900, the child prodigy son of a synagogue cantor in Dessau. After studies with Ferruccio Busoni, his early works included two symphonies and a violin concerto in a musical language atonal but anchored, the style strong on lemon juice, light on sugar.

His dream, however, was to create stage works more theatrical and vernacular than opera and more operatic than theatre. After two projects with the writer Georg Kaiser, fate intervened: in a Berlin café, Weill encountered Brecht. The volatile Marxist playwright oddly offset the eggheaded workaholic composer: Weill's sinuous melodies, pliable harmonies and downright singability gelled compellingly with the sleazy edginess of Brecht's words.

Seemingly attracted to opposites, Weill married a Viennese actress from an impoverished background: Karoline Blamauer, stage name Lotte Lenya, blessed with a caustic voice, smouldering

gaze and megawatt smile. She was working as Kaiser's childminder when they met; she had been entrusted with escorting Weill to the house, which involved rowing across a lake. So instant was their chemistry, she reported, that Weill lost his glasses overboard.

In time, they divorced, remarried and both had affairs, yet in their way remained inseparable. When she grumbled that he worked so much she hardly saw him, Weill reassured her that she came next, 'right after my music'.

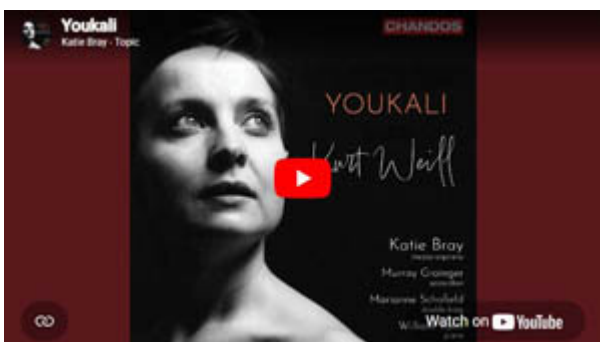
Mahagonny was Brecht and Weill's first collaboration, beginning with a short 'songspiel', 'song play', which caused a sensation in 1927. The full-length version was delayed, however, by a commission for them to create *Der Dreigroschenopera* (The Threepenny Opera); this made their names and fortunes.

By the time the *Mahagonny* opera was ready, the Nazis were in the ascendant and Hitler's supporters noisily disrupted the Berlin premiere. When Hitler took power in 1933, Brecht fled the country. Weill soon followed suit; friends drove him overnight to the French border.

After two years in Paris – where he wrote sophisticated songs in French for the cabaret artist Lys Gauty – Weill and Lenya travelled to the US for a project with the writer Franz Werfel: *The Eternal Road*, a 'dramatic oratorio' based on the Bible. New York was congenially free-spirited. They stayed; Weill scarcely looked back. He commented once that he had 'never felt as much at home in my native land as I have from the first moment in the United States'.

He set about transforming his style for Broadway – where no other immigrant composer achieved such acclaim. In 1920s Germany, he used popular dance rhythms such as foxtrots and tangos to create sultry, grimy atmospheres; for the comparatively sanitised 1940s US, he turned smoother, working with sassy lyricists like Ogden Nash (*One Touch of Venus*) and Ira Gershwin (*Lady in the Dark*). Satire went; humanity remained. As for the perfect hybrid – an American opera for Broadway – he created it in *Street Scene* (1947), with the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes.

Did he really change, though? The mezzo-soprano Katie Bray, who has just released an album of Weill's songs, thinks not. 'You can hear the same Weill voice underneath,' she says. 'He hasn't lost himself; he just had to be flexible to appeal to a different audience. It's remarkable that the same person could compose the absolutely bonkers overture for *The Threepenny Opera*, and a song like "This Time Next Year", which is pure, heart-breaking simplicity.'



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7ntAn4OC6I>

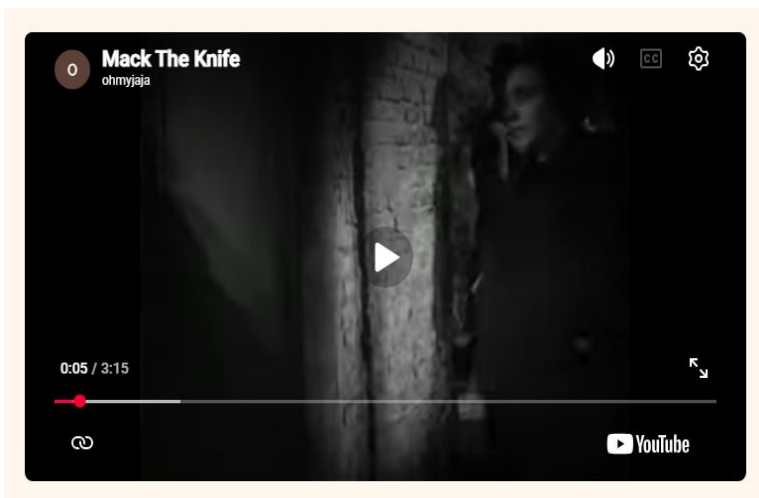
Her album centres on 'Youkali', written in Paris as an instrumental tango for a play; Roger Fernay later added words. 'It's about our search for a place of belonging, contentment and calm,' Bray says.

‘This music, full of longing, appeals today when times feel so unsteady. Youkali, the perfect land, is just a dream. There is no Youkali. But that doesn’t stop us trying to find it.’ Like *Mahagonny*, it could not be more relevant.

Weill would have approved; his concerns always remained current. His last show was *Lost in the Stars*, based on Alan Paton’s *Cry the Beloved Country*, about apartheid South Africa.

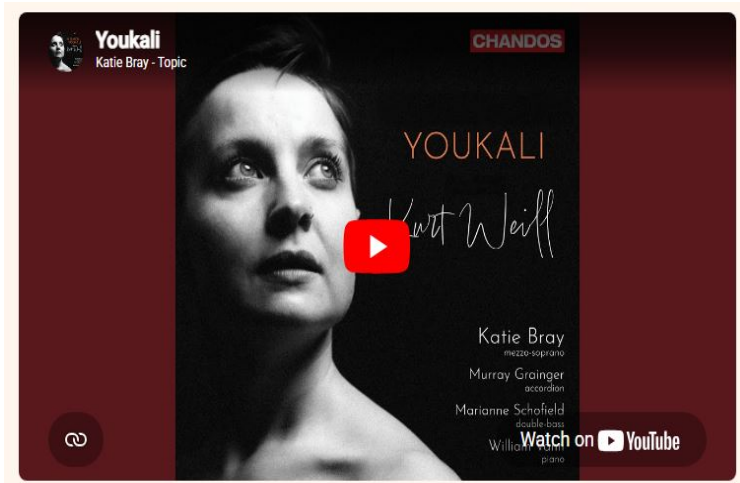
Depending on its environment, a chameleon changes its colour, but not its vision. The real Kurt Weill was there all the time.

The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny, *English National Opera*, London Coliseum, 16–20 February. Tickets: 020 7845 9300. *Katie Bray’s In Search of Youkali* is out now on Chandos.



Video 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMWc4h77e2o>



Video2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7ntAn4OC6I>