

The Problem of Political Music in Eisler and Weill

by Gary Zabel

We have come to recognize the significance of the Weimar Republic for the development of modernism in the arts only in the past ten years or so. In that relatively brief span of time, such cultural historians as John Willett, Eugene Lunn, and Douglas Kahn have succeeded in refuting previous conceptions of inter-war Germany as the passive recipient of aesthetic advances that had already taken place in Zurich, Vienna, and Paris. It is certainly true that the origins of aesthetic modernism predate the revolutionary upheaval that put an end to the Kaiser's rule in November, 1918. But during the Weimar period that ensued, artists working in a variety of media shaped pre-existing aesthetic materials into an essentially new cultural configuration.

There are many ways of characterizing the innovation embodied in the modernist culture of the Weimar Republic (whose most important urban center was actually Berlin). We might call attention to its dominant emphasis on a *Neue Sachlichkeit* - a "New Matter-Of-Factness" - that combined an attitude of cool emotional neutrality with technological experimentation in the arts. Or we might refer to that culture's pervasive sense that artistic individualism had been rendered obsolete by overwhelming and anonymous historical forces, so that collective modes of aesthetic creation were now on the agenda. For purposes of the present discussion, however, the most relevant fact about Weimar modernism is that it stemmed from an alliance of the aesthetic and the political avant-gardes. Most of the key artists of the period - including Piscator, Brecht, Grosz, Heartfield, Dix, Moholoy-Nagy, Tucholsky, Gropius, Meyer, Eisler, and Weill - were either actively engaged on the revolutionary left or at least in general sympathy with its goals. In their work, modernism became more than a one-sidedly aesthetic break with the past. It was organically linked with an increasingly desperate political effort to create a new and emancipated world on the ruins of the old. When the Nazis proceeded physically to liquidate the modernist achievements of Weimar after Hitler's rise to power in 1933, they

characterized them as forms of “cultural bolshevism.” The truth is they were not far off the mark.

The most vital elements in Weimar culture did indeed develop in connection with the process of revolutionary social transformation taking place in the Soviet Union. With the end of the First World War, there was a two-way flow of artists - both emigres and visitors - between Germany and Russia, as well as the establishment of “friendship societies” which facilitated reciprocal aesthetic influence. What made this cultural exchange significant was the fact that it occurred with an explicitly avant-garde inspiration. At least in its initial decade, the October Revolution encouraged experimentation in the arts as well as in politics and the economy. With the support of the director of the People’s Commissariat for Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Russian avant-garde embraced the Revolution as a quintessentially modernist event - an exhilarating leap into an uncharted future. Such art radicals as Kandinsky, Mayakovsky, Tatlin, and Rodchenko staffed the Soviet government’s Fine Art Department which granted commissions, organized exhibitions, created a network of provincial museums, and sponsored agit-prop work, poster production, “monumental propaganda” (including Tatlin’s famous prototype for his constructivist Monument to the Third International), and other new forms of public art. Thus from its position of administrative authority, the Soviet avant-garde commanded the resources necessary to apply modernist principles to the far-reaching aesthetic reconstruction of society, that is, until Stalin’s so-called “revolution from above” put an end to the experiment. Of course, the Weimar avant-garde was never in a position to engage in such an extensive and officially sanctioned process of reconstruction. After all, the German Revolution was ultimately aborted. But the artistic innovations of Weimar were just as vital, aesthetically speaking, as their Russian counterparts. There was one area, moreover, in which the art of the Weimar Republic was far in the vanguard of that of the Soviet Union, namely, the development of politicized forms of musical composition, performance, and reception.

This development proceeded in opposition to two established musical forces. On the one hand, it rejected the militant hermeticism, the a-political insularity of the central current of modernist music,

epitomized by Schoenberg's pointed declaration that: "We who live in music have no place in politics and must regard it as foreign to our being. We are a-political, at best able to aspire to remain silently in the background." On the other hand, the new politicized music of the Weimar years was artistically advanced. It rejected the tepid verbal messages and watered-down musical traditionalism of what was then known as *Tendenzmusik* - music with a conscious social tendency - of the sort performed by the workers' choruses sponsored by the Social Democratic Party. In both their application of musical technique and their handling of the relation between music and text, the Weimar avant-garde sought to employ the major innovations of twentieth century music to elicit forms of emancipatory consciousness and action in the broadest strata of the population. Now the problem faced by the project for an aesthetically advanced form of political music was formidable. Previously, modernist music and the mass audience had inhabited different planets. If the project was to succeed, it would be necessary to bridge that astronomical gap.

Hindemith's celebrated music festivals at Donaueschingen and Baden-Baden set the context in which the first serious breakthroughs in the new political music were to occur. The festivals were organized in accordance with the composer's attempt to steer modern music into two avenues which he named *Gemeinschaftsmusik* (community-music) and *Gebrauchsmusik* (utility-music). *Gemeinschaftsmusik* originated in his contact with an expanding German youth movement whose original political tenor was somewhat ambiguous, although it was ultimately to veer to the right (certainly without Hindemith's approval). He wrote choral music for the youth movement's amateur performers, music which toned down the technical difficulty of new music while at the same time familiarizing untrained ears with modernist conventions. In a similar vein, Hindemith composed *Lehrstuecke* for his music festivals, didactic cantatas which were exercises in moral and social education performable by amateurs. *Gebrauchsmusik* maintained this emphasis on popular accessibility and relevance, but it differed from *Gemeinschaftsmusik* by exploring new technologies and outlets for the mass dissemination of culture instead of embracing intimate or traditional forms of community. Thus in his festivals and associated endeavors, Hindemith's efforts on behalf of utility-music encouraged

the development of music for radio and film, as well as miniature opera and other forms of music theatre. Although his own attempt to reform modernist music in a popular direction was not overtly political, its results were adopted and utilized by the left avant-garde. The crucial event in the genesis of the new political music occurred at the Baden-Baden festival of 1927. There Weill and Brecht presented their *Mahagonny Songspiel*, a miniature opera which bitterly satirized bourgeois society, while Eisler contributed his *Tagebuch* op. 9, a cantata which pointed the way out of Weimar's malaise and confusion with a piano quotation from the *Internationale*.

The standard view of Weill as a junior partner in his collaboration with Brecht is decidedly false. On the contrary, their working alliance represented the convergence of two equally powerful artistic projects. Brecht attempted to "refunction" the tradition of Western theatre so that it could depict the major contending social forces of the contemporary period, while at the same time encouraging a distanced reflectiveness in the theatre audience. Independently, Weill tried to rework the operatic tradition so that it could, in his own words, "deal with the monumental themes of our time," in a way that stimulated popular understanding. Moreover, each man, of course, was committed to developing and employing specifically modernist techniques. Brecht used various theatrical devices - including placards with written slogans, the projection of visual images on giant screens, interruption of dramatic action, and direct address by actors to the audience - in order to create a *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation-effect), which forced the spectator to break with socially dominant conventions of interpretation. In like manner, Weill fused a "serious" modernist musical language - one that he had begun to develop while studying with Ferruccio Busoni - with popular jazz and dance idioms, thereby creating montage-like effects designed to jolt the listener into a heightened state of awareness and insight. When these two separately conceived artistic projects coalesced in the late 1920s, the result was a new form of music theatre that was both socially and aesthetically radical, and intended to reach a broad, popular audience.

In addition to the wildly successful *Threepenny Opera* - which was performed more than 4200 times within one year of its opening - the

most important products of Weill's collaboration with Brecht were the *Mahagonny Songspiel* and the full-length opera based upon it, the *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. The *Songspiel* originated in a group of five poems that Brecht had included in his *Hauspostille* ("Domestic Breviary"), a volume of verse appearing in the form of a leather-bound prayer book that mocked the piety and hypocritical moralism of the German middle class. With a minimal overall narrative structure, the set of Mahagonny poems capitalized on Weimar's obsession with everything American by presenting depictions of life in a mythical boom-town, located somewhere in the Old West, devoted to satisfying the needs of its rough male inhabitants for gambling, whiskey, and sex - at the appropriate price. A number of innovations characterized the musical interpretation of the five poems, along with a programatically concluding sixth poem written by Brecht at Weill's request. First, there was Weill's unusual, variously colored instrumentation - 2 violins, 2 clarinets, 2 trumpets, saxophone, trombone, piano, and percussion - which was inspired, perhaps, by Stravinsky's *L'Historie du soldat*, and which was perfectly suited to the *Songspiel's* surrealist pastiche of serious and popular idioms. Then, there was Weill's decision to give one of the two female parts to his wife, the actress Lotte Lenya, whose untrained, childlike voice contrasted appealingly with the operatic proficiency of the other singers. The most significant of Weill's innovations, however, was his development of the genre of song (he explicitly chose the English word in order to avoid the traditional connotations of the German Lied and Gesang). The *Songspiel*, whose name is a word-play on Singspiel (operetta), consists of the six *Mahagonny* poems set as independent songs connected by orchestral interludes. Each song has some of the qualities of the popular jazz tune, but these are contrasted with other musical elements which leave no doubt that Weill is not competing with the writer of conventional hits. In particular, each song has a comprehensible melody and rhythmic clarity which anchor the naive ear in what is otherwise a difficult musical experience, replete with double-tonic constructions and non-tonal sets. The disquieting juxtaposition of disparate musical elements contributes to what Weill calls the "intellectual bearing" of the music, which is "thoroughly serious, bitter, accusing." At the Baden-Baden festival, this general musical attitude was re-enforced visually by Caspar Neher's staging, which placed the

singers, who carried placards with provocative slogans, inside a boxing ring that also enclosed an American bar. Directly behind the ring, there was a screen upon which disturbing images of violence and greed were projected.

Weill's music plays a different role in the *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* than it does in the *Songspiel* because the former is a full-length opera that integrates music with spoken dialogue. But the principles that guide such integration also represent a break with the dominant operatic tradition, especially in its late romantic, Wagnerian form. That is to say, the purpose of music in the larger *Mahagonny* is not illusionistic; it is neither to provide supportive psychological characterization nor to advance the plot, but, conversely, to stop the dramatic flow in order to present an autonomous musical equivalent - in Weill's neologism, a "gestic" representation - of the meaning of the play's events. This clash of music and spoken language contributes to that general alienation-effect which Brecht's aesthetics placed at the center of music theatre. Still, the basic musical form which Weill carries over from the little *Mahagonny*, namely, the parody of the popular hit tune, jibes with Brecht's dramatic intentions at a deeper level. The main purpose of the text of the *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* is to reveal the inner contradictions of bourgeois society through a critique of the concept of fun. At the center of *Mahagonny*, the "Here-You-May-Do-Anything Inn," all human needs can be met through the exchange of money. But this universal commodification, which makes need-satisfaction possible, also distinguishes it from substantive fulfillment. The sole crime in *Mahagonny* is failure to pay one's bills, for which the punishment is death. This ultimate sanction, which is applied to one of the play's central characters, Jimmy Mahoney, shows up the hollow nature of all gratification that is not freely offered. The threat of death that hangs over the competitive performances of bourgeois society endows the experience of fun with a desperate quality. And it is precisely this desperation that Weill's fragmented, unnerving parody of the hit tune evokes on an emotional plane.

While the political content of Kurt Weill's music was focused on a critique of bourgeois society, Hans Eisler's music was more positively directed to rallying the forces necessary to effect its revolutionary

transformation. Like Weill, Eisler was squarely located in the modernist musical tradition, but in Schoenberg's free atonal and twelve-tone techniques rather than in Busoni's neo-classicism. In fact, Schoenberg considered Eisler to be his most promising student after Webern and Berg, but their relationship foundered on a deep politico-aesthetic disagreement. While still in the process of mastering the avant-garde musical language of the Second Vienna School, Eisler came to feel that it represented a regression into an "art for art's sake" posture. The inaccessibility of the new music, the fact that it was intelligible only to experts, was supposed to be an indication of its advanced, revolutionary character. But, for Eisler, this elitist isolation meant that Schoenberg and his students had turned a deaf ear to the momentous social confrontations that were inexorably determining the fate of humankind. Eisler argued that music exists only in its reception by an audience. The pseudo-radicalism of the new music would be converted into a genuinely revolutionary orientation only if it succeeded in making contact with the politically activated masses.

After a dramatic personal break with Schoenberg in 1926, Eisler placed his musical skill at the service of the radical wing of the workers' movement. He became composer, pianist, and conductor for Berlin's Young Communist agit-prop group, *Das rote Sprachrohr* (the Red Megaphone), which directed its efforts principally to working class youth. In writing incidental music, militant songs (*Kampflieder*), and ballads for the group, Eisler addressed such issues as unemployment, strikes, solidarity, peasant rebellion, and so on. Employing a dialogical working method, he developed ideas for compositions in discussions with workers, and refined his creations by submitting them to listeners for critique. In this way, he was able concretely to gear himself to the musical experience of his audience. Yet his purpose was not to leave that experience unaffected. It was, rather, to transform it through the application of modern technique. In Eisler's view, the resources of new music, when adapted to the needs of a formally uneducated audience, were uniquely capable of furthering political awareness and enlightenment. They enabled the composer to reject the popular song's emphasis on musical charm and individual expressiveness, in favor of an emotional tone suited to cognitive analysis, which is in turn the key to effective action. By resisting lyrical identification with the singer, and serving instead as

an independent commentary on the text, music was to encourage the development of knowledge in the context of a deepening collective experience. In this way, it was to contribute to the formation of a subjective agency capable of revolutionizing society.

Eisler brought the results of his agit-prop work into his own collaboration with Brecht, beginning in 1930. In many ways, the most successful product of their association was its first fruit, the didactic play, *The Measures Taken*. This was a sort of Brechtian refunctioning of a piece of music theatre that he had already produced with Kurt Weill, *The Yea-Sayer*. The earlier work was adapted from a Japanese Noh story about the killing of a boy who endangers an important expedition. In the version with Eisler, the plot concerns the execution of a Young Comrade, whose adventurism and lack of discipline while on an undercover mission threaten catastrophe to the Chinese revolutionary movement. As Albrecht Betz points out, *The Measures Taken* has the form of a Christian oratorio that has been put to political purposes. The play depicts a Party tribunal in which an examining committee, represented by the chorus, sits in judgment over the four agitators who have killed their compatriot. The internal structure of the play, the sequence of scenes that are evoked as evidence, is a kind of inverse Christian Passion, with the career of the Young Comrade held up as a life that is not to be imitated. That life is portrayed as ending in an avoidable fatality; it therefore functions as a vehicle of political education. Eisler's homophonic choral writing, which aims at the transmutation of feeling into a distanced objectivity, underscores this inversion of the Christian model. His rehearsal suggestion that the singing be "extremely taut, rhythmical and precise," like a report at a mass rally, was intended to break with the traditional oratorio's "beautiful performance," and its identification with the sacrificial victim. The point of the music is to encourage insight rather than pathos.

The evident vitality of at least some of Eisler's and Weill's compositions in the 20s and 30s, their success in fusing modernist forms with "low" genres, and their ability to reach a mass audience, ought to settle once and for all the question as to whether aesthetic quality in music is compatible with politicization. But these undeniable achievements do not mean that the political music of the Weimar years was successful. For the task that music set itself was

to advance the process of social emancipation, and it could do this only by means of an extraordinarily difficult cultural intervention. Its creators had to utilize the most sophisticated achievements of so-called “bourgeois” music in order to help break the subjective bonds that attached vast numbers of people to the dominant social order, as well as to develop their capacities for effective historical action. Thus the fate of avant-garde political music was tied to that of the revolutionary movement as a whole. With the triumph of Hitler in Germany and Stalin in the Soviet Union, that movement failed disastrously. So did those musical forces which saw themselves as part of the larger struggle for social renewal.

As a result of these failures, Eisler and Weill were driven into exile in the comparatively depoliticized United States. It is now common for left-wing cultural theorists to condemn Weill for having accommodated himself to the capitalist entertainment industry, while praising Eisler for having maintained his revolutionary orientation. But the truth is that the objective circumstances of exile required both men to make compromises. Just as Weill became a celebrated creator of Broadway musicals, so did Eisler become a successful writer of movie scores: in fact, he won an Oscar for the music for Fritz Lang’s 1943 studio film, *Hangmen also Die*. Still, it was Eisler rather than Weill who converted the experience of exile into a compelling musical statement. His revival, during the 1940s, of the tradition of German and Austrian Lieder on a new dodecaphonic basis can be seen as the final and most profound incarnation of Weimar’s musical experiment. Written in Hollywood, that factory of illusions in which Eisler was forced to labor, these songs reflect upon the significance of struggle, defeat, and resolve. They are like messages in bottles cast from a shipwreck in the hope that they will be discovered by future generations. One of them is the setting of an elegy by Brecht:

You who will emerge from the flood
In which we have gone under
Remember
When you speak of our failings
The dark time too which you have escaped.

For we went, changing countries oftener than our shoes

Through the wars of the classes, despairing

When there was injustice only, and no rebellion.

And yet we know:

Hatred, even of meanness

Contorts the features.

Anger, even against injustice

Makes the voice hoarse. Oh, we

Who wanted to prepare the ground for friendliness

Could not ourselves be friendly.

But you, when the time comes at last

And man is no longer a wolf to man

Think of us

With forbearance.