

**Escaping the Dark Time. Are Modernism and Politics Irreconcilable?  
Hindemith, Weill and Eisler Didn't Think So**



Gary Zabel; Hindemith; Weill; Eisler

*The Musical Times*, Vol. 133, No. 1798 (Dec., 1992), 621-623.

Stable URL:

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*The Musical Times* is currently published by Musical Times Publications Ltd..

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# ESCAPING THE DARK TIME

**Are musical modernism and political involvement irreconcilable? Gary Zabel explores artistic and social revolution in the work of Hindemith, Weill and Eisler.**

**D**uring the last ten years or so we have come to recognise the significance of the Weimar Republic in the development of modernism in the arts. Although the origins of aesthetic modernism pre-date the revolutionary upheaval that put an end to the Kaiser's rule in November 1918, it was only subsequently that artists working in a variety of media shaped pre-existing aesthetic materials into an essentially new cultural form.

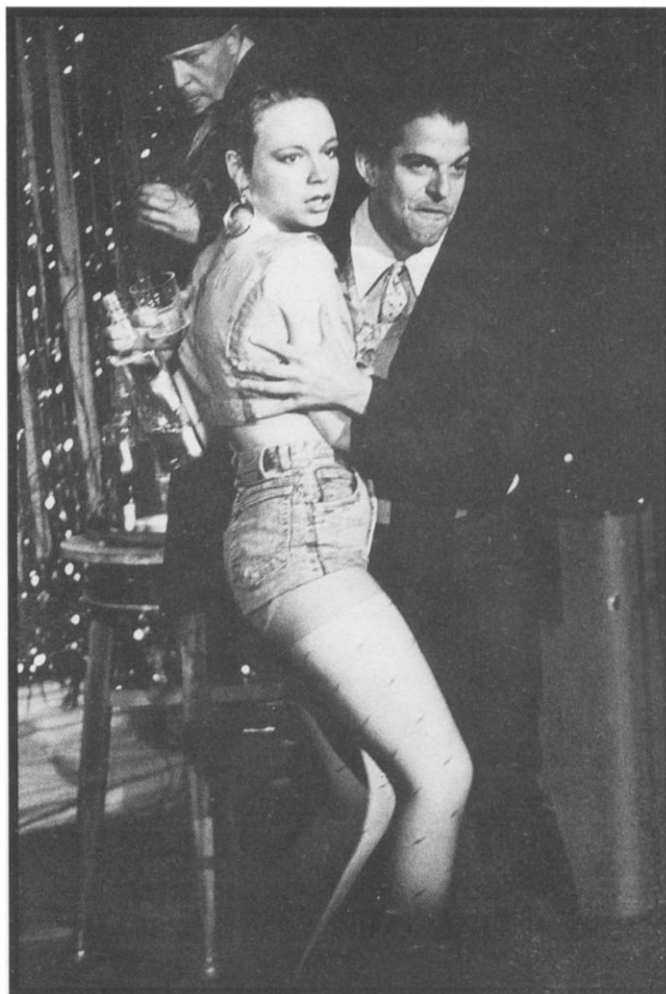
There are many ways of characterising these innovations. We might draw attention to its strong emphasis on *Neue Sachlichkeit* (new matter-of-factness), which combined an attitude of cool emotional neutrality with technological experimentation in the arts. Or we might refer to a pervasive sense that artistic individualism had been rendered obsolete by overwhelming and anonymous historical forces, so that collective modes of aesthetic creation needed to be promoted. But perhaps the most relevant fact about Weimar modernism is that it stemmed from an alliance of the aesthetic and the political avant-gardes. In the work of many artists, modernism became more than a one-sided aesthetic break with the past: it was organically linked with an increasingly desperate political effort to create a new and emancipated world out of the ruins of the old. And when the Nazis proceeded physically to liquidate the modernist achievements of Weimar after Hitler's rise to power in 1933, they characterised them as forms of 'cultural bolshevism', a description that was not far off the mark.

The development of music in the Weimar Republic proceeded in opposition to two established musical forces. On the one hand, it rejected the apolitical insularity of the central current of modernist music, epitomised 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'. On the other hand, the new politicised music of the Weimar years was artistically advanced. Rejecting 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, the Weimar avant-garde sought to employ the major innovations of 20th-century music to elicit forms of emancipatory consciousness and action in the broadest strata of the population, a task of formidable proportions. 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.

It was Hindemith's celebrated music festivals at Donaueschingen and Baden-Baden which set the context in which the first serious

breakthroughs in the new political music were to occur. The festivals were organised 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). *Gebrauchsmusik* maintained this emphasis on popular accessibility and relevance, but

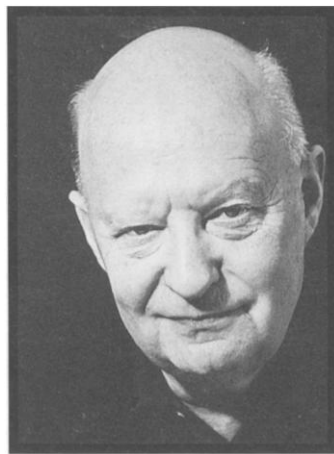
MAHAGONNY: THE 'HERE-YOU-MAY-DO-ANYTHING INN'  
Photo Opera Factory/Bo Lutoslawski



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 endeavours, 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 utilised by the left avant-garde. The crucial event in the genesis of the new political music, however, occurred at the Baden-Baden festival of 1927. There Weill and Brecht presented their *Mahagonny Songspiel*, a miniature opera which bitterly satirised bourgeois society, while Eisler contributed his *Tagebuch*, 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 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. Each man, of course, was committed to developing and employing specifically modernist techniques. Brecht used various theatrical devices 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 with popular jazz and dance idioms, 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 which was both socially and aesthetically radical, and intended to reach a broad, popular audience.

In addition to the wildly successful *Threepenny opera*, 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*. With a minimal overall narrative structure, the *Mahagonny* poems capitalise 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, whisky, and sex - at the appropriate price. A number of innovations characterised the musical interpretation of the poems. First, there was Weill's unusual, variously coloured instrumentation, inspired, perhaps, by Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat* and 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



HINDEMITH

innovations, however, was his development of the genre of *song*. 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'.

Weill's music plays a different role in the *Rise and fall of the city of Mahagonny*, a full-length opera which integrates music with spoken dialogue. The principles that guide such integration, however, 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 characterisation 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 placed at the centre of music theatre. Still, the basic musical form which Weill carries over from the little *Mahagonny* - 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 which is endowed 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 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 12-note techniques rather than in Busoni's neo-classicism. In fact, Schoenberg considered Eisler to be his most promising student after Webern and Berg. Their relationship, however, 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 agitprop group, *Das rote Sprachrohr* ('The red megaphone'), which directed its efforts principally at 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 to gear himself concretely 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 favour 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 revolutionising society.

Eisler brought the results of his agitprop work into his own col-

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laboration 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*, the internal structure of which is a kind of inverse Christian Passion, with the career of the Young Comrade held up as a life which is *not* to be imitated, a life portrayed as ending in an avoidable fatality and therefore functioning 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 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 politicisation. 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 employ 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 depoliticised United States. It is now common 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 Eisler became a successful writer of movie scores. 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 labour, 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.*