

“Off to Mahagonny”

Kim Kowalke



Kim Kowalke, President of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music in New York

Kim Kowalke, President of the Kurt Weill Foundation in New York, explains the history, reception, and performance issues of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* [Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny]. Weill and Brecht’s “epic opera,” though less frequently performed than *Die Dreigroschenoper*, has nevertheless had an extraordinarily rich but problematic performance history.

During Weill’s lifetime there was no definitive version of Mahagonny, with the so-called Paris, Berlin, and Vienna versions all being adaptations of either the Songspiel (1927) or the full-length opera (1930). Tell us about the performance history of Mahagonny during Weill’s lifetime.

Kowalke: In Weill’s lifetime *Mahagonny* never had a chance to establish itself, largely because of the political situation. Universal Edition published a piano-vocal score prior to its première on 9 March 1930 in Leipzig with Gustav Brecher conducting. A few days later Maurice Abravanel conducted it in

Kassel. That summer George Szell led it in Prague, and in October Wilhelm Steinberg conducted twelve performances in Frankfurt. By then, however, all the possibilities for the Berlin opera houses had fallen through. Even Klemperer declared it “immoral” and therefore too risky for the erstwhile adventurous Kroll. Finally Ernst Josef Aufrecht, who had commercially produced both *The Threepenny Opera* and *Happy End* in Berlin, did it at the Kurfürstendamm Theatre. So its first production in Berlin wasn’t even at an opera house, but it did enjoy a run there of some fifty performances.

The Berlin production didn’t use a cast of only opera singers. There were some opera singers, but mainly operetta singers, including Harald Paulsen, the original Macheath. It wasn’t that it was unskilled musically, as Alexander Zemlinsky conducted, but Lotte Lenya sang Jenny here for the first time, a role that Weill had never intended for her. That casting decision required a good deal of adaptation for that Berlin production in December 1931, including the composition of a new “Havana Lied.” And that was really the last performance of a recognisably “whole” *Mahagonny* during Weill’s lifetime. So it had less than two years when it could be performed. After that there simply wasn’t an opportunity to do it again in a major opera house in German-speaking territories.

Lenya did do it in Vienna in April 1932, in a version lasting little more than an hour, again at a private theatre rather than in a state-subsidised opera house. Then in December, for the so-called “Paris version” of *Mahagonny*, with Weill’s blessing Maurice Abravanel added to the Baden-Baden *Songspiel* three or four numbers from the big opera that had a similarly small orchestration. That version was also done in London and Rome for a few performances. That was it during Weill’s lifetime – nothing more of *Mahagonny*. In fact, when Lenya contacted Universal Edition after the war and asked “Where is ‘Mahagonny?’”, the response was that the Gestapo had taken it and that the full score and parts had vanished.

Was that true?

Kowalke: I suspect they indeed thought that the holograph Partitur had been lost. But I can’t believe that all the pre-war performing materials were actually gone at that point. At that time Lenya was inquiring because, after the world-wide success of *The Threepenny Opera* that started here in New York in 1955 and a bit later in London, there was a big recording frenzy for all the Weill/Brecht works. Columbia/Philips decided that they would do a *Mahagonny*. I think that was the first stage work after the *Dreigroschenoper* that they recorded. So that recording was the beginning of the second life of *Mahagonny*, which entailed some new, silent revisions for Lenya, because

now she was singing at least a fourth or a fifth lower than she had back in 1931, when her voice had been described by Ernst Bloch as that of a songbird, “sweet, high, light, dangerous, cool, with the radiance of the crescent moon.” But in 1956, this was a voice she herself described as “two octaves below laryngitis.”

So, on the one hand it was an echt Mahagonny in that it was the first time that the whole opera had been done, with a good conductor, Brückner-Rüggeberg – but with lots of adaptations so that Lenya could sing it, and with no indication of these changes. She never sang it on stage after 1933, so only this record survives as her legacy; it has nevertheless assumed authority for a performance practice that some people still regard as the sole “authentic” one.

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When was the first post-war full production staged?

Kowalke: It was in Darmstadt in 1957 and then it slowly made the circuit in Germany. Unfortunately in 1963, the Berliner Ensemble decided that it would do something it billed as Das kleine Mahagonny, and by that they didn’t mean the 1927 Songspiel. What they did was to take some characters and text from the big opera, hire three musicians and sort of bastardise the whole thing: condense it into an hour and pretend that it was the original Baden-Baden Mahagonny. Lenya allowed it be done for a while as a favour to Brecht’s widow, Helene Weigel, but when other theatres wanted to do it, she said “No.” Unfortunately a recording was also released, so you can hear that there isn’t one moment of actual Kurt Weill left in the piece. To this day, that version has never been authorised for performance again. In fact, one of the first major decisions I had to make after Lenya’s death, as her successor as President of the Foundation and administrator of Weill’s estate, was to close a production of this bastardised Mahagonny in Bochum. It caused a huge uproar. This must have been about 1982 or 83.

But by then, Mahagonny had really established itself in the major opera houses. I remember very well the 1979 première at the Metropolitan Opera with Teresa Stratas as Jenny, a production directed by John Dexter and conducted by James Levine. This was a major milestone in the history of Mahagonny. There hasn't been much debate after that: "Is Mahagonny really an opera?" "Yes, of course it is, it's in the repertoire of the Metropolitan Opera" – (and most of the other great houses in the world). It even made its debut at the Salzburg Festival (in a dreadful production, alas). In fact, there are very few major houses in the world that haven't produced Mahagonny now. The Royal Opera at Covent Garden has announced it for the 2015 season.

I know the Mahagonny-Songspiel preceded the full-length Mahagonny, but I am curious to hear your thoughts about the relationship between the two works and whether or not Weill softened some of the musical language when reshaping that source material into the three-act opera. Also, what are some of the problems that the Songspiel material presents in the opera vis-à-vis its placement and its function?

Kowalke: Well, the Songspiel was a commission for the Baden-Baden Music Festival, and it's only 25 minutes long. It has a perfectly symmetrical structure – four men, two women; the first number is Auf nach Mahagonny for the four men with a text in German. Then the next number is Alabama Song for the two women with a text in Elisabeth Hauptmann's primitive English. Then you have another number for the four men in German, then you have Benares for everyone in English again. In between each of these, you have instrumental interludes that are very Stravinskian (in 1923 Weill had attended the German première of L'Histoire du Soldat and admired it greatly) and almost atonal. It was done as a very provocative Songspiel, a play on the traditional genre "Singspiel" with the notion of the American popular song lurking in the background. The piece scandalised a music festival where Webern, Schönberg and Berg were getting their premières too.

Here was Weill with his Mahagonny Songspiel set in a boxing ring. Aaron Copland reported it was the succès de scandale of the festival. But strangely enough, there were only two performances of that piece during Weill's lifetime: the one in 1927 and then one in Hamburg in something like 1930, and then never again. No sooner had it been performed in Baden-Baden, or maybe even beforehand, Brecht and Weill had decided that they were going to make a full-length opera of the Mahagonny-material. So the Songspiel went up on the shelf and what Weill did was to incorporate certain sections into the opera. There we get the Alabama Song, but he recomposed it. He got rid of most of the crunchy, Bartókian dissonance in the accompaniment, simplified the harmonies, reduced the three strophes to two, and interestingly

made the vocal part much more operatic. In the opera it's not a duet for two sopranos, Jessie and Bessie, but an entrance aria for Jenny accompanied by the girls of Mahagonny. So you get the obligato, coloratura soprano embellishment for Jenny in the second stanza, which isn't in the Songspiel at all. Weill recomposed the Alabama Song for the opera, but Benares and Gott in Mahagonny" were basically taken into it verbatim.

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Which is problematic []

Kowalke: Indeed, they are a problem. In the Songspiel it's just a series of six scenes/songs with no plot, no real characters, nothing to connect the dots. These numbers work brilliantly in that context. But what do you do with these independent tableaux in the opera? Where do they fit in? Should Gott in Mahagonny come before the execution or after the execution? We know where Weill put it in the piano-vocal score, but there is no obvious dramaturgical reason for it. It could go virtually anywhere in Act III. So those Songspiel sections that are simply stuck into Act III are always a problem. How do you make them fit into the larger structure of the whole piece? Sometimes productions have omitted them, and there is certainly a plausible case to be made for that. David Drew suggested that the Benares Song might best be "quietly dropped," particularly if the Crane Duet is included in Act III. There's a domino effect on the dramaturgical structure, of course. It's complicated.

Could you talk a little bit more about the relationship between Brecht and Weill as librettist and composer. Mahagonny of course was the work that engaged Brecht and Weill for nearly the entire time of their collaboration, but when it opened in Leipzig, Brecht had lost interest and moved on. Could you characterise first of all their relationship during the writing of Mahagonny and what happened afterwards? And why did various literary texts of Mahagonny appear that bear no relation to Weill's music?

Kowalke: I think that in the largest context we are dealing with a unique situation, that of Brecht and Weill. I can't think of another major playwright and a major composer who actually wrote opera or musical theatre pieces together, resulting in six or seven pieces. I suppose we could say Strauss and Hofmannsthal, but Hofmannsthal was no Brecht; Molière and Lully, perhaps, but they didn't really collaborate. Weill and Brecht enjoyed a real collaboration. Every day they would get together, and they would write. With Mahagonny this went on for about two years. Together they worked on the libretto for about a year. Weill isn't credited as co-librettist, but he talked all the time about how every decision about the text was calculated because it was going to be set to his music. And he just couldn't find a way to start writing the music until the libretto was done. In that sense, he was a lot like Stephen Sondheim, who hates to write a song before the whole play is done. In fact, he jokes that he'd like to see the whole thing staged before he writes a musical number. I think Weill would have preferred to have worked that way too, because character and dramatic situation dictated what he wrote.

Anyway, by the time Weill wrote the score of Mahagonny, it had become obvious to Brecht that no matter what they had talked about initially in the abstract, in practice the music was going to wash out all his ideas about epic theatre and so forth. So he didn't even go to rehearsals for the première in Leipzig. I can't recall if he attended the première, but he didn't really care about the piece anymore and that's what caused him to publish his own version, as he also did with Threepenny Opera. In 1931 Brecht published a version of the libretto of Mahagonny that took no account of the music whatsoever and basically sabotaged the joint work by implying "This is what I would have written if it hadn't been an opera with Weill". When he published that text of Mahagonny, it was accompanied by an essay called "Notes About Mahagonny," co-authored with Peter Suhrkamp. In this essay Brecht basically contradicts everything that Weill said about the opera. In effect, it was a premonition of what was going to happen later in the year in Berlin. When they were doing this production at Aufrecht's theatre, every day the two creators were fighting about which should prevail – the music or the text, Weill or Brecht.

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Which led to the now infamous anecdote about the photographer ...

Kowalke: Yes, one day a photographer came and said "I want you two in a photo" and Brecht refused and said "I am going to throw this phony Richard Strauss down the stairs!" Aufricht, the producer, had to intervene. He said, "OK, Brecht, I'll give you a theatre, so you can produce *Die Mutter* there and let Weill and Caspar Neher do *Mahagonny* here." Their ideas at this point had diverged completely, largely because Brecht was now very much into Marxist theory and the "Lehrstücke," the idea that all plays should be didactic and should present the class struggle and so forth. Of course, *Mahagonny* isn't about that at all. Brecht simply layered all that Marxist veneer on top of *Mahagonny* and *Threepenny Opera* after the fact in these literary versions. The real problem is, if you are a director staging *Mahagonny* and you take Brecht's script from 1931 and Weill's score from 1930, the two don't match, and you can't make them work together. You have no choice but to use the text that was actually performed in 1930, the one contained in Weill's score, and not the one contained in Brecht's antidote to the opera.

This leads quite naturally to the concept of a Brechtian staging; what a Brechtian staging was in 1930 versus what it would be now and what a director struggles with when they are looking at staging Mahagonny. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Kowalke: Sure. John Willett, the great Brecht scholar, used to say that *Mahagonny* was actually not authored just by Brecht and Weill, but by Brecht, Weill and Caspar Neher, the designer, who was really the brains behind what has come to be known as "Brechtian staging" or the basic principles of "epic theatre." Virtually all of what we now call "metadrama" or "metadramatic devices," the idea that you would project the lyrics during a song or have the performer come down to the footlights, put a red light overhead, as if to say "Song!" and then sing it right to the audience, without any pretence of realism; or expose the lighting grid, or utilise the now famous half-curtain with the title or the piece written across it.

All of these devices were intended to support a type of anti-naturalism ▯

Kowalke: Not only anti-naturalism, also anti-realism, anti-Stanislavskian theatre with the fourth wall. The idea is that we're not going to pretend that

what we're seeing is real, that you're not in the theatre. This was not going to be a Wagnerian narcotic experience. Rather, Brecht likened it to attending a boxing match or a circus. As an audience member, you were always to know where you are, you're being entertained, but you're also being challenged to engage rather than to sit passively. Cheer, be repelled, be alienated, but don't just sit there.

So I think that anyone who wants to do a "Brechtian staging" today and copies all the things that Neher did in 1930 will end up getting a museum piece that doesn't shock, entertain, or invite people to think. Today we have so many new technological capabilities. If Neher had had them, he would surely have done live video projections, and you would have seen the set change magically in front of your eyes, with every theatrical effect that you could imagine. Today, if you put the half-curtain on stage and then draw it back and forth on a wire, it just looks ridiculous. I just saw it done precisely like that at the Vienna State Opera's completely misdirected production of Mahagonny, and it comes off as almost laughable at this point. The Met did it that way too back in 1979, as if that was the only way you could remain true to Brecht. The best way to remain true to Brecht is to use the most imaginative technological possibilities of theatre today to achieve the same effect that was achieved back in 1930.

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Did Weill and Brecht deliberately eschew any love story in the opera in order to advance some particular conception of what an opera should be in modern times?

Kowalke: To some extent, I think that's true. If you read Weill's own synopsis of the plot of Mahagonny, the word that occurs, I think 14 times, is "city". So this is a piece about the rise and fall of the city, not of Jimmy and Jenny, not of the individuals or their personal relationship. Weill made a point of that, that this is not about the psychological portrayal of individuals, but rather a story

of a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah, of the ills of modern society and how they impact individual lives. So the emphasis is not on the relationship of Jim and Jenny psychologically, but on what prevents them from connecting, on what prevents them from living happily ever after or even dying tragically, as in most operas. Here, it's done sort of matter-of-factly. Right before Jimmy is executed, there's that chilling scene when he says "Kiss me, Jenny" and she says "Kiss me, Jimmy" but it's all pro forma. There is no emotion behind it; it's going through the motions. You have to have a context for the relationships because otherwise it becomes uninteresting. But one must never lose sight of the fact that the story is a modern morality tale. It is not primarily a Marxist critique of capitalism. Of course, there is some of that in Brecht's indictment of modern society, but it's also about excesses: of eating and drinking, and the failure to have money to pay for it, of course. A culture given over to the prime directive of "Du darfst" is doomed to extinction. To restrict Weill's and Brecht's updated parable of Sodom and Gomorrah is to diminish the opera. I have seen, for example, a production where every time Jenny came on stage, she carried a suitcase full of money and there was a spotlight, not on her, but on the suitcase of money. Now, that was interesting for about fourteen seconds and after two more acts of this "mickey-mousing," I thought that this was about the worst idea I'd ever seen on stage because there is much more to the piece than that. If such drivel were really the essence of "Brechtian" theatre, then Brecht would have to disown himself.

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Tell us something about the available recordings of the opera that we can listen to now as well as the recent spate of DVDs. What are their respective merits and problems?

Kowalke: There is no satisfactory recording of the opera, frankly. There are two audio recordings, each of which approximates certain dimensions of the opera. I think one of my failures as president of the Kurt Weill Foundation is not being able to see a full recording of the opera made with a really first-rate

orchestra, conductor, and cast, and preferably one where they had done it on stage, because it really does assume a great deal of immediacy after that experience. There are some wonderful things about Lenya's recording. There was only one Lenya, and she could pull certain things off. But her vocal limitations or handicaps are not something that one would want to imitate as if they were intrinsic to the work or the style. There have been many productions that have attempted to cast Jenny with an actress who sings like Lenya, and it just doesn't work. There was only one Lenya, and there can't be another. She was the composer's wife. Sure, she made changes so that she could perform the works, but that's not repeatable.

The other audio recording is a studio recording that the WDR made back in the 1980s, I think, and it's a mixed bag as well. So if there is one thing I'd like to accomplish in the next decade, it would be to get a really terrific recording of Mahagonny, maybe when the critical edition comes out, and with an appendix that includes all of the options for the various versions, maybe like the Show Boat recording that John McGlinn did.

There are some compelling DVDs available, which are probably more useful than the audio recordings, except that most of them were filmed live, so you can't fix the things that went wrong. I think we now have the Salzburg Festival production on DVD, which I can't recommend – it was very badly directed and largely miscast. There's a more recent Los Angeles Opera production, directed by John Doyle, the "flavour of the moment" at that point on Broadway. He had no idea what to do with Mahagonny, but there are some very compelling performances, particularly Audra McDonald as Jenny. I think James Conlon conducted a very vivid account of the orchestral score. And then, of course, the performance of Lenya's "dream Jenny", Teresa Stratas, has recently been released as a DVD by the Metropolitan Opera. But probably the best DVD right now is the Madrid opera production from about a year and a half ago. The staging has its ups and downs, but I think it's imaginative. And vocally/musically, it's certainly the best of the three.

Interview: Norman Ryan

