

“*Pressing forward toward ‘me’ ...*”

Elmar Juchem

Although Kurt Weill’s creativity evolved for the most part in the world of musical theatre, where he proved to be a hugely productive and ground-breaking innovator, he also left behind a small number of works written for the concert hall.

He composed the cantata *Der Neue Orpheus* [“The New Orpheus”] Op. 16 for soprano, solo violin and orchestra, a setting of the eponymous poem by Ivan Goll (1891–1950), in the summer of 1925. (In May of that year, he had moved in with his girlfriend Lotte Lenya).

He had completed *Der Protagonist*, his first operatic work, shortly before that; the piece is in one act, to a libretto by Georg Kaiser, who apparently introduced Weill to Goll.

Weill initially mentioned the composition in a brief postscript to a letter to Universal Edition dated 7 July 1925: “I am currently working on a cantata for soprano & small orchestra (for Lotte Leonard).” Although he called it a cantata then, when he finished the short score six weeks later he used the designation “Concertino for Soprano, Violin and Orchestra;” but then, on the cover page of the full score (finished in mid-September), he returned to the term “cantata,” which was the name used when Universal Edition published the piano-vocal score (by Arthur Willner) in March 1926 (publication no. UE 8472).

Weill could not help but be excited by the libretto; Goll’s poem has the singer come from Thrace to 1920s Berlin, where he meets “Eurydice [representing] unredeemed humankind” at the Silesia Train Station (the “Ostbahnhof” today). But no one heeds his voice, since the crowd is already “pressing back to the underworld, everyday life, and suffering.” In his desperation, Orpheus wrings his heart asunder, alone in the waiting room.

The collision of Greek mythology and contemporary metropolitan life, along with lofty style and concision, harboured great, artistically rewarding potential for conflict. In addition, there were suggestions of musical situations which simply begged to be composed. In view of the poem’s subtextual comic aspect,

Weill's music seems somewhat severe; it appears to attempt no expressive reflection over large stretches in the piece. The musical language avails itself of a vastly extended tonality which it only surrenders in the middle section (bars 170–292) in favour of a seemingly comprehensible language. This is the point where the text describes how Orpheus finds an opportunity for musical affirmation, acceptance, in the modern world – as a piano teacher, a cabaret and circus musician, choirmaster of war-veteran clubs, organist, conductor of subscription concerts and the pit pianist in a suburban cinema.

Accordingly, Weill subdivides this section into seven variations – without, however, an evident theme before them. Yet the variations can be heard as “idiom variations,” prescribed by the text; on the other hand, Weill could also have hidden quotations in each of them. At least, the Irish folksong “Gone Are the Days” is distinctly audible in the first variation (it was common in piano-teaching methods at the time), the final variation contains a short reference to the Pilgrims’ Chorus from Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* and, at the end of this section, Weill gives the solo violin a quote from *Che farò senza Euridice* from Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice*, almost like a sly wink.

Weill himself noticed the change in his musical language; he informed his parents a month after finishing the composition: “I need to master an expression which is still new to me. And I find, to my delight – as I had already discovered with *New Orpheus* – that I am gradually pressing forward toward ‘me’ – that my music is becoming much surer, much freer, much simpler & more flexible. That also has to do with the fact that I have outwardly become more independent, sure, cheerful and less tense. Naturally, life together with Lenja plays a large part in that.”

“Ivan Goll has just written to me from Paris, saying that he talked extensively with Diaghilev about Royal Palace and Orpheus and that he gave him the piano scores of both of them. The affair seems promising and Goll suggests that you and I take up a kind of ‘general offensive’ on Diaghilev.”

Contrary to Weill's hopes, the premiere performance of *Der neue Orpheus* with Lotte Leonard did not happen. Most renowned internationally for her singing of the Bach-Händel repertoire, the celebrated concert singer was also committed to contemporary music (her performance of Weill's *Frauentanz* Op. 10 in Salzburg in August 1924 was greatly acclaimed).

When other options for performance (with Hermann Scherchen and Otto Klemperer, among other possible conductors) failed to materialise, Weill combined the cantata's premiere with the first performance of his second one-act opera *Royal Palace*, which he had written immediately after *Der neue Orpheus* (the libretto also by Goll).

In a letter to the world premiere's director, Weill described the cantata as a study for the opera (a situation similarly complicated as that between his musical *Mahagonny* and his opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*), adding that *Der neue Orpheus* "is a new genre, somewhere between aria and chanson."

Thus the concept of a "subspecies" becomes discernible for the first time, one which was to become a common thread throughout his works; *Der neue Orpheus* ultimately oscillates among the styles of cantata, cabaret number, concertino and chanson, concert aria and orchestra song.

The work had its world premiere on 2 March 1927 (Weill's 27th birthday) in Berlin's State Opera; Erich Kleiber conducted, Delia Reinhardt sang and Rudolf Deman, the concertmaster, was the solo violinist.

The work is scored for symphony orchestra with double wind, although Weill omits horns and violins other than in the solo. Instead, he writes for the violas *divisi*, corresponding to the usual division of the violins into 1st and 2nd (and thus necessitating thought about the strings' seating arrangement for performance). At the time, Weill suggested that the singer could augment her performance with "small gestures, somewhat in the style of Yvette Guilbert;" that fabulous chanson singer had already made an impression on composers including Verdi and Gounod (even Busoni found her performance style remarkable) – as well as facial expressions, she also used small gestures with her arms and shoulders in particular for extra dramatisation.

Nevertheless, the vocal part of *Der neue Orpheus* requires a trained soprano

voice capable of contending with a large orchestra. (Alongside Mozart, Delia Reinhardt also sang Wagner and Strauss operas). In the summer of 1927, Weill made a highly intriguing suggestion when, together with Goll, he proposed that the cantata be performed in Paris by Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes; this did not come to pass, for reasons undisclosed.

At a later date, Weill stated that the cantata's performance time was 18 minutes.