

Concordia University

Transatlantic: A Genealogy of Modern American Musical Theatre  
from *Jonny Spielt Auf* to *West Side Story*

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in

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of

History

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## ABSTRACT

Transatlantic: A Genealogy of Modern American Musical Theatre  
from *Jonny Spielt Auf* to *West Side Story*  
Matthew Friedman

The motion picture adaptation of *West Side Story* in 1961 was a singular moment for American musical theatre. Its release normalized a unique trajectory of modernism that had first emerged in Germany after the First World War. At that time, German composers had initiated a radical modernist renovation of the opera. The result was a new definition of opera that subverted traditional categories and sought to express the condition of modernity.

The generation of young American composers who had studied in Europe during the 1920s was deeply influenced by the German project, and they adapted its aims and aesthetic program to construct an American modern operatic tradition. This aesthetic project emerged in the United States in 1937, when Marc Blitzstein's musical play *The Cradle Will Rock* was first performed on Broadway. This show was a conscious effort to articulate the program of the new German opera in an American context.

Blitzstein had a strong personal and creative influence on Leonard Bernstein, who consciously emulated his mentor and whose compositions for the musical stage in the 1940s and 1950s employed the aesthetic vocabulary of the German and American operatic projects. *West Side Story* clearly articulated that aesthetic. The genealogy of this process is revealed in the personal papers, articles and lectures of the German and American composers.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The genealogy of this project stretches back many years. I would never have conceived of studying the history of culture without the example and encouragement of my parents, Joe Friedman and Nancy Salter, throughout my life. My mother inspired me to read and write great things and my father's passion for music and opera gave me something to write about.

I benefited from the guidance and assistance of a community of exceptional scholars. I must thank Rosemarie Schade for her part in the genesis of my idea and for showing me that this is the work I was meant to do; Frederick Bode, Stephen Scheinberg and Normal Ingram for challenging me and making me a better historian, and Andy Ivaska for giving my ideas serious thought and consideration, even though I was not his student. I am particularly grateful for the guidance provided by my supervisor Graham Carr, whose patience, erudition shaped my work.

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## INTRODUCTION

“What they have done with *West Side Story* in knocking it down and moving it from stage to screen is to reconstruct this fine material into nothing short of a cinematic masterpiece,” wrote Bosley Crowther, the *New York Times*’ movie critic, of the cinematic premiere of *West Side Story* in 1961.<sup>1</sup> He continued: “The drama of New York juvenile gang war, which cried to be released in the freer and less restricted medium of the mobile photograph, is now given range and natural aspect on the large Panavision color screen, and the music and dances that expand it are magnified as true sense experiences.”<sup>2</sup>

Crowther sensed that he had participated in a unique cultural event. Three days later, in a full-length feature article in the Sunday edition, he noted that *West Side Story* was a decisive break with musical conventions that “runs the risk of baffling or confusing some audiences.”<sup>3</sup> Like Crowther, other critics also recognized the film not only as something new, but the *start* of something new. *Variety*, the daily bible of the Hollywood film industry, enthused that “*West Side Story* is a beautifully-mounted, impressive, emotion-ridden and violent musical which, in its stark approach to a raging social problem and realism of unfoldment may set a pattern for future musical presentations.”<sup>4</sup>

With the premiere of the film adaptation of Leonard Bernstein’s musical tragedy, a unique modernist aesthetic became embedded in American culture. *West Side Story* was the culmination of an operatic renovation project initiated by radical modernist

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<sup>1</sup> *West Side Story* was re-released in a special DVD edition in 2003. See Leonard Bernstein, *West Side Story*. Special Edition, Richard Beymer, Natalie Wood, MGM Home Entertainment 1004353, 2 DVD.

<sup>2</sup> Bosley Crowther, “Screen: ‘*West Side Story*’ Arrives,” *New York Times*, 19 October 1961, 39.

<sup>3</sup> Crowther, “The ‘*West Side Story*’ Expands on Screen,” *New York Times*, 22 October 1961, X1.

<sup>4</sup> Review of *West Side Story*, *Variety*, 27 September 1961, 6.

composers in Weimar Germany. This project was adopted by the generation of American composers who had immersed themselves in European modernism in the 1920s. The modernist operatic renovation emerged on the American musical stage during the worst days of the Great Depression in Marc Blitzstein's militant 1937 "play in music" *The Cradle Will Rock*. The film version of *West Side Story* articulated it in the hegemonic discourse of postwar American culture. In this way, the radical modernism of the German operatic reform was normalized; a process Terry Smith characterizes as "simplifying the modern, reducing it by naturalization into the ordinary."<sup>5</sup>

This was a remarkable process of cultural transfer, in which American composers adapted a distinct modernist aesthetic that had emerged on the far side of the Atlantic Ocean to create an explicitly American operatic musical theatre. The goal of this thesis is to document its genealogy and establish the transatlantic cultural connections of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism. Those connections have received scant attention in the existing literature on American musical theatre. The genealogy encompasses three interrelated narratives: the German operatic renovation project, the American project it influenced, and its hegemonic articulation in the popular theatre and *West Side Story*.<sup>6</sup> The creators of these narratives were not merely participants, but conscious observers and commentators, members of an international community that continually reflected on itself. They revealed themselves in their personal correspondence, scholarly and popular writings, and lectures – in the very matter of their intellectual community and creative environment.

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<sup>5</sup> Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and design in America*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 426.

<sup>6</sup> Two spelling variants of "theatre" were in use in the United States during the period under discussion. Although common usage preferred the American spelling "theater," theatre professionals and composers tended to favour the British variant "theatre." I have used the American spelling where it appears in quotations, titles and proper names.



The process that culminated in *West Side Story* was a conscious project of renovation and redefinition. It was an effort to create an unequivocally modern, but American, operatic musical theatre. When *West Side Story* appeared in the late-1950s, that meant articulating the hegemonic values of the postwar consensus. The process is not without precedent. In *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, Serge Guilbaut documents a similar process in the visual arts. American avant-garde artists, he writes, employed the visual vocabulary of European abstract expressionism to articulate “values that were subsequently assimilated, utilized, and coopted by politicians with the result that artistic rebellion was transformed into aggressively liberal ideology.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet it is a process which the mainstream literature is unable to recognize, let alone for which it can account. Instead, the historiography of American musical theatre is preoccupied with identifying the unique and definitive form of American musical theatre: is it operetta, opera, minstrel show, revue or musical comedy? The insistence on a single definition of “musical theatre” has made it impossible for the mainstream literature to account for radical departures from the tradition.

In 1990, Joseph P. Swain rhetorically asked whether musical theatre was a fitting subject for scholarly attention. He concluded that it was, but observed that it had “received virtually no attention from serious music critics at all, and what little it has received has been patronizing at best.”<sup>8</sup> Although Broadway has been the subject of sensational memoirs and biographies of its biggest stars since the 1920s, the defining work is Gerald Bordman’s 1978 *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*, a reference

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<sup>7</sup> Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 200.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 7.

text, with digressions into critical analysis of individual shows. Bordman exerted a profound influence on subsequent historians of the musical theatre by defining the central and recurring themes of the literature. These are that American musical theatre has enjoyed a lengthy, continuous and above all native evolution, beginning with the ballad operas of the Colonies before the American Revolution, and that this process occurred principally on Broadway, culminating in a clearly defined art form in the 1940s.

This unanimity among the historians and musicologists is striking, and an emphasis on continuity is typical of virtually every one of their works. They focus on the American musical theatre as an entertainment industry producing an archetypical *musical*. While they note that it underwent periodic changes in content, theme and style, they stress a rigidly linear evolution culminating with the musical's attainment of "maturity" after the Second World War. According to Julian Mates, "a variety of circumstances conspired to create a musical stage right from the beginning of America's dramatic history."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he insists that the roots of the American musical reach as far back as the eighteenth century.

One of the consequences of this stress on historical uniformity is the tendency to essentialize "the musical." For example, Mates documents the rise and fall of American ballad opera, minstrel shows, burlesque, vaudeville and the circus only to argue that they come together in a single undifferentiated artistic mass on the "Great White Way." He maintains that all forms of musical theatre "are encompassed in the twentieth-century musical."<sup>10</sup> In *American Musical Comedy*, Bordman proposes a subtler definition of the musical that recognizes two interrelated forms, the "musical play," descended from

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<sup>9</sup> Julian Mates, *America's Musical Stage: Two Hundred years of Musical Theatre*, (Westport: The Greenwood Press, 1985), 20.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

operetta, and the “musical comedy.” It is a useless distinction, and Bordman concedes as much when he notes that “all book shows are, after all, essentially musical plays.”<sup>11</sup> In effect, musical comedy and the musical play are both manifestations of the Broadway musical. John Bush Jones, locates the start of the evolutionary line in 19<sup>th</sup> century English operetta. He argues that Gilbert and Sullivan operettas provided a formal model of the “integrated musical” which American creators were able to exploit for their own ends as they established the thematic and narrative conventions of the American musical. According to Jones, Gilbert and Sullivan rarely departed from the “boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back” formula, which was the narrative basis of the American musical: “With few exceptions, but with as many variations as librettists could dream up, this formula became the nearly universal plot of all American book musicals until about 1960 and even beyond.”<sup>12</sup>

However, it is emphatically an *American* tradition. Despite continual foreign influences from Gilbert and Sullivan, to the pseudo-Viennese operettas of Sigmund Romberg and Victor Herbert, the literature emphasizes how American dramatists, directors and composers simply absorbed these influences into an extant American artistic tradition, or re-directed that tradition in opposition to alien styles. According to Bordman, American composers and librettists explicitly rejected foreign traditions following the First World War for two reasons: “The first was a disenchantment with

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<sup>11</sup> Bordman, *American Musical Comedy: From Adonis to Dream Girls*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 156. Broadway musicals have traditionally been categorized as either “revue shows” – a series of unrelated musical and vaudeville numbers, like the Ziegfeld Follies — or “book musicals” — narrative dramas and comedies featuring musical numbers.

<sup>12</sup> John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre*, (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 10.

Europe and things European; the second was our own new self-awareness and with it the onset of a genuine self-consciousness.”<sup>13</sup>

From that point on, the literature characterizes the evolution of the musical stage as a process of actualization. Ethan Mordden begins *Better Foot Forward* with the bald statement that “it really begins with *Show Boat*.” He writes that the history of the musical up to Jerome Kern’s and Oscar Hammerstein II’s 1927 show “is a great, slow advance from sappy story-and-song contraptions to transcendent music dramas – in short, art.”<sup>14</sup> The turning point came with *Oklahoma!* in 1943. Jones agrees, arguing that Rodgers and Hammerstein set a new course for the Broadway. He observes that “six of their nine shows became hits, fairly dominating the Broadway musical stage for those sixteen years [1943 to 1959], and their musicals also influenced other librettists, lyricists and composers by establishing both a model and a standard for a new kind of musical play.”<sup>15</sup>

A “standard,” perhaps, but Jones suggests continuity and evolution rather than revolutionary change. He agrees that Rodgers and Hammerstein created the first truly integrated musical productions, where the book and music serve each other, and neither is subservient. In effect, *Oklahoma!* was the apotheosis of the “integrated musical” introduced by *H.M.S. Pinafore* 65 years before. Moreover, Jones insists that Hammerstein’s “techniques for embedding serious issues in the story of a commercially viable musical became models for future librettists and lyricists.”<sup>16</sup>

It is difficult to argue against Rodgers’s and Hammerstein’s contribution to Broadway. Their shows demonstrated how serious large-scale musical theatre could be

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<sup>13</sup> Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 297.

<sup>14</sup> Ethan Mordden, *Better Foot Forward: The History of American Musical Theatre*, (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1976), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Jones 140.

<sup>16</sup> Jones 160.

financially viable mass entertainment on the stage and later in film. Furthermore, *Oklahoma!* represents the commercial mainstream of the American musical theatre. Even more than Gilbert and Sullivan, Rogers and Hammerstein are utterly wedded to the “boy meets girl” formula that, according to Jones, defines the American musical. The narrative structure of the play is essentially linear and though its setting is uniquely American – the Oklahoma territory just before statehood – its characters draw from a romantic past.<sup>17</sup> The music is tonally and rhythmically conservative, more evocative of 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism than of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism.

However, the argument that sees *Oklahoma!* as the inevitable consummation of the American musical theatre to that point is extremely limiting. As Christena Schlundt has observed, this idea of progress vastly simplifies the range of forms the musical has taken. Because of the acceptance of this norm, Schlundt argues, “all other forms that musical comedy took previously are seen as preparatory for this ultimate expression, and all those which followed as being more or less successful based on this norm.”<sup>18</sup> It is exactly there that the traditional historiography of the American musical theatre breaks down, because its teleology does not account for shows that depart from the norm.

If American musical theatre is an unbroken evolutionary line, then anything that departs from it is a failure, an evolutionary dead end, or not American musical theatre at all. How then to explain *West Side Story*? Jones notes that it was both “risky and innovative”<sup>19</sup> and Mordden observes that Leonard Bernstein’s music was such a break

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<sup>17</sup> Virtually all of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s collaborations have romantic or exotic settings, from *South Pacific*’s tropical locale, and the mysterious Siam of *The King and I*, to turn-of-the-century New England in *Carousel*.

<sup>18</sup> Christena L. Schlundt, “Jerome Robbins and His Contribution to the Theatre of Musical Comedy,” in *Musical Theatre in America*, ed. Glenn Loney (Westport: The Greenwood Press, 1984), 332.

<sup>19</sup> Jones, 193.

from the Broadway tradition that it initially met with considerable skepticism: “Many patrons’ reaction to the Bernstein-Sondheim score was interested but chagrined: Where was the tune?”<sup>20</sup>

The problem was that it was a modern tune. Walter Benjamin defines “the ‘modern’ as the new in the context of what has already been there,”<sup>21</sup> and *West Side Story* was shockingly different to audiences accustomed to the familiar traditions of Broadway. They had collided with modernity. The decisive break with the old world necessarily implies the consciousness of entering the new. Fredric Jameson calls it “a twofold movement, in which the foregrounding of continuities, the insistent and unwavering focus on the seamless passage from past to present, slowly turns into a consciousness of a radical break.”<sup>22</sup> Reflexivity is thus an important characteristic of modernity, and the practitioners of modernism were both conscious and self-conscious of the modern aesthetic narrative occasioned by their rejection of musical tradition.

The modernism that so bewildered *West Side Story*’s audiences had its roots in Weimar Germany. The First World War and the creation of the Republic had fatally subverted the “eternal truths” expressed by the Romantic tradition of Wagnerian opera. In response, the postwar generation of German composers, notably Kurt Weill, Hanns Eisler and Ernst Krenek, embarked on an explicitly modern project of operatic renovation, manifesting in music what literary critic Art Berman has characterized as “high modernism.” According to Berman, this aesthetic completed “the disillusionment with and the rejection of the romantic admixture of transcendentalism, which earlier

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<sup>20</sup> Mordden, 263.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 544.

<sup>22</sup> Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, (London: Verso, 2002), 24.

modernism had gradually outmoded but never repudiated.”<sup>23</sup> It was an aesthetic that challenged and subverted traditional categories. For the German composers, conventional musical forms were as infinitely variable and malleable as the literary forms noted by Benjamin: “There were not always novels in the past, and there will not always have to be; not always tragedies, not always great epics.”<sup>24</sup> It was clear to the postwar generation that a new Germany and a new age required a new music and a new operatic form. One of the fundamental themes of the German operatic renovation project was that an opera *did not have to be opera*, it could be whatever form of “music theatre” a composer and librettist might dream up.

For their American contemporaries, modernism was as much an effort to create an indigenous American music as an explicit rejection of Romanticism. However, their aesthetic program closely paralleled the German operatic reform, and, as the 1920s gave way to the 1930s, the new German opera became the explicit and conscious blueprint for a modern American opera. At an American composers’ conference at the Yaddo artists’ colony in May, 1932, Blitzstein called on his assembled colleagues to discover the distinctive qualities of American music. This would be an explicitly modern music because “we need a musical form that can have a wider range than the now-outmoded forms of the past.”<sup>25</sup> There had been modernist experiments in the United States before, but these had been isolated and ephemeral. Aaron Copland, arguably the most prominent American composer to emerge in the 1920s recalled that “my own generation found very little of interest in the work of their elders.” Indeed, “we had only an inkling of the

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<sup>23</sup> Art Berman, *Preface to Modernism*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 61.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Peter Demetz, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 224.

<sup>25</sup> Minutes of Composers’ Conference – Yaddo, May 2-3, 1932. Marc Blitzstein Papers (MBP), Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison WI, microfilm, reel 7.

existence of the music of Charles Ives in the twenties.”<sup>26</sup> By 1920, Ives had already abandoned music for the insurance industry.

Barbara L. Tischler writes in *An American Music* that the generation of the 1920s – Copland, Blitzstein, George Antheil and Virgil Thomson, to name four – found that “one important and interesting way to contribute to the acceptance of American music, irrespective of its intended national inspiration or message, was to compose modern music.”<sup>27</sup> In its rejection of Romantic transcendentalism, modernism had liberated music from its identification with national idioms. Moreover, the American modernists’ project was facilitated by their European counterparts’ identification of all things American with novelty and modernity. The American composer could not create an American music “by tending his own garden,” Tischler writes. Instead, it was modernist experimentation that equipped this generation “to look to their own environment and compose music that touched familiar chords, even as it was characterized by modern sound and technique.”<sup>28</sup>

At the top of the agenda was the creation of a truly American operatic tradition. In 1941, Copland evoked the project’s urgency when he claimed that “no single country’s musical life appears to be entirely mature until its composers succeed in creating an indigenous operatic theater.”<sup>29</sup> This sense of urgency was widely felt and was reflected in the Federal Music Project’s desperate attempt to stage an “American Grand Opera” in 1938. The result was the largely forgotten *Gettysburg* by Morris Hutchings Ruger but Kenneth Bindas notes that “the opera was below normal standards and not performed

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<sup>26</sup> Aaron Copland, *Copland on Music*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1944), 166.

<sup>27</sup> Barbara L. Tischler, *An American Music: The Search for an American Musical Identity*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 92.

<sup>28</sup> Tischler, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Copland, *Our New Music: Leading Composers in Europe and America*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company), 1941, 187.



again simply because it was not quality work.”<sup>30</sup> There had been opera in the United States at least since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It ranged from William Henry Fry’s *Leonora* in 1845 to Douglas Moore’s 1938 folk opera *The Devil and Daniel Webster* and George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. But none satisfied the modernists’ criteria for an American operatic theatre. Rather, their goal was, in the words of George Antheil, its first champion and most forceful ideologue, to create “a real American school of opera,”<sup>31</sup> implicitly a modern opera that would “educate rather than flout the public.”<sup>32</sup>

The projects ultimately merged in what Michael Denning calls the “laboring” of American culture. He locates the dynamic of this process in the “cultural front,” a grouping of American intellectuals, artists and cultural apparatuses that articulated the culture of the American Popular Front during the Great Depression. For him, the Popular Front was not merely a labour movement, but a historical bloc, “a broad and tenuous left-wing alliance of fractions of the subaltern class.”<sup>33</sup> According to Denning, the Popular Front spawned a unique American culture even if it failed to exert hegemony and saw its political and social aims frustrated by the conservative postwar consensus.

Denning was not the first to see the Depression, the New Deal and the Popular Front’s aspirations articulated on the Broadway stage. John O. Hunter and J.E. Vacha suggested the contours of this alternate narrative as long ago as the 1960s. Vacha identified a musical theatre that existed outside the Broadway conventions. Unlike the mainstream musical, whose escapism was a stark contrast – and perhaps an antidote – to

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<sup>30</sup> Kenneth Bindas, *All of this Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA’s Federal Music Project and American Society*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 39.

<sup>31</sup> George Antheil, “Wanted – Opera By and For Americans,” *Modern Music* 7, no. 4 (1930): 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. By the time Antheil was writing, the opera had ceased to be “a living theatre.” See Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 102-104.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, (London: Verso, 1997), 6.

the Depression, this other theatre, which included forms as diverse as cabaret, revue and opera, used the crisis as a central theme. In developing the theme, Vacha wrote, it “found the tools for the greater expression and widened form of the forties and thereafter.”<sup>34</sup>

For Vacha, this alternative musical theatre tradition was not defined by its form – for it was expressed in a number of different forms and styles – but by its thematic preoccupations. He noted: “musical comedy was not the only popular road open to composers for the musical theater in the thirties.”<sup>35</sup> *I Married an Angel* and *Of Thee I Sing* might have articulated Broadway’s escapist conventions, but Weill’s *Johnny Johnson*, and the revue *Pins and Needles* – produced by members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union at the Labor Stage in 1937 – blazed new aesthetic and narrative ground by embracing themes of class struggle, economic crisis and war.

The turning point for modernists like Blitzstein, Copland and writers like Langston Hughes and Kenneth Burke came at the end of the 1920s. The social fabric which had sustained the experimental modernisms of that decade seemed bankrupt in the wake of Sacco’s and Vanzetti’s executions in 1927 and the economic collapse that began in 1929. According to Denning, “writers and artists of the modernist generation attempted to reconstruct modernism, to tie their formal experimentation to a new social and historical vision, to invent a ‘social modernism,’ a ‘revolutionary symbolism.’”<sup>36</sup>

Blitzstein’s *The Cradle Will Rock* was not only the most significant development of this process, but it was also the estuary where the German and American operatic projects finally met. The popular stage, Hunter writes, was the only outlet for politically-

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<sup>34</sup> J.E. Vacha, “Posterity was Just Around the Corner: The Influence of the Depression on the Development of the American Musical Theater in the Thirties,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 67, (1968): 590.

<sup>35</sup> Vacha, 578.

<sup>36</sup> Denning, 59-60.

engaged performance in 1937. “As an artist with a social message, Blitzstein needed a forum. He found it in the musical theatre. It was there that he released his great personal energy and drive.”<sup>37</sup> Denning correctly argues that the dawning “social consciousness” of individual artists was only a small part of the story. He wrote that while accounts of the emigration of artists like Blitzstein to a popular and engaged art have usually been characterized as “melodramas of commitment,” but can be better understood as an uneasy alliance “of the *moderns*, the *émigrés*, and the *plebeians*.”<sup>38</sup>

“Moderns” like Blitzstein and Copland sought a way to redirect their modernism through the cultural apparatuses of the Popular Front. For example, the members of the New York Composers’ Collective, an outgrowth of the Pierre DeGeyter Club, a Communist musical organization named after the composer of the “Internationale,” were faced with a complex problem. They believed that the time was right for the creation of an authentic American music for popular consumption. However, Bindas notes that “the experimental and dissonant modern music of the 1920s and early 1930s had alienated many concertgoers.” The members of the Composers’ Collective, including Blitzstein, Copland, Thomson and Henry Cowell, faced the problem of “how to speak to the American people when they obviously knew so little about ‘serious music.’”<sup>39</sup>

In this respect, American modernists confronted many of the same challenges as their German contemporaries and, as many of the latter were forced into American exile by the Third Reich, they eagerly adopted their aesthetic project. Blitzstein in particular

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<sup>37</sup> John O. Hunter, “Marc Blitzstein’s ‘The Cradle Will Rock’ as a Document of America, 1937,” *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 228.

<sup>38</sup> Denning, 58-59.

<sup>39</sup> Bindas, 62.

became the champion and emissary of the German aesthetic. In so doing he became, in Copland's words,

the first American composer to invent a vernacular idiom that sounded convincing when heard from the lips of the man-in-the-street. The taxi driver, the panhandler, the corner druggist were given voice for the first time in the context of serious musical drama. This is no small accomplishment, for without it no truly indigenous opera is conceivable.<sup>40</sup>

In that role, he had a profound personal influence on the direction of the American operatic project, on the career of Leonard Bernstein, and ultimately on *West Side Story*. Bernstein recalled that Blitzstein "thought of me as a young version of himself,"<sup>41</sup> and in turn characterized his mentor as the prophet of a new American musical theatre. *West Side Story* clearly displays Blitzstein's influence.

However, Bernstein was the product of a different generation. By the time he attained artistic maturity, the historical bloc of the Popular Front had disintegrated. If Blitzstein's modernism expressed the values and goals of the radical 1930s, Bernstein's articulated the hegemonic preoccupations of the 1950s. *West Side Story* was an artifact of the postwar consensus. This was, according to James T. Patterson, an era of "grand expectations," when Americans benefited from an unparalleled period of economic prosperity. Between 1950 and 1960, the United States' gross national product rose 37 percent, and by the end of the decade "the median family income was... 30 percent higher in purchasing power than in 1950."<sup>42</sup> A spirit of optimism and a belief in unlimited progress "defined a guiding spirit of the age."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Copland, "In Memory of Marc Blitzstein (1905-1964)," *Modern Music* 41, no. 4 (1964): 6.

<sup>41</sup> Leonard Bernstein, speech, Marc Blitzstein Memorial Concert, 28 April 1985, TMs, Leonard Bernstein Collection (LBC), Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC, box 97, folder 15.

<sup>42</sup> James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 312.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

In politics, almost everybody liked Ike, regardless of class or political affiliation. Even the Americans for Democratic Action, “chock full of implacably liberal Democrats,” had urged General Eisenhower to run for president in 1948.<sup>44</sup> By the time he became President, writes Stephen J. Whitfield, “the ship of state had become a love boat.”<sup>45</sup> The labour movement was equally lovestruck and the 1950s were a period of unparalleled labour peace. While “union leaders focused on bread-and butter improvements,”<sup>46</sup> they worked hard to mitigate class antagonisms and prevent strikes. AFL-CIO president George Meany saw himself as an ally of capital and state authority, not their enemy. Patterson notes that “far from trying to exacerbate class conflict, Meany resembled a big-shot lobbyist instead, taking a chauffeur-driven Cadillac to an office that overlooked the White House, golfing with cabinet officers at his country club, and living in the suburb of Bethesda, Maryland, rather than in a working class neighborhood.”<sup>47</sup>

However, the postwar historical bloc appeared both ephemeral and tenuous. Already in the latter half of the decade, dangers from within threatened to subvert the American consensus. The most alarming was the menace of Communist fifth columnists in the state and cultural apparatus. In response, writes Whitfield, “the movie industry was conscripted into the Cold War.”<sup>48</sup> Hollywood became the principal hegemonic apparatus of the 1950s under the minute scrutiny of the House Un-American Activities Committee

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<sup>44</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 2nd. ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 17.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Patterson, 322.

<sup>47</sup> Whitfield, 20.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 127.

and the Motion Picture Alliance. The film industry of the period articulated the values of consensus, rewarding films that celebrated conformity and order.<sup>49</sup>

America was also preoccupied with a growing youth culture that existed outside the consensual mainstream and challenged traditional authority. What Lary May calls the film industry's "quest for conformity and consensus"<sup>50</sup> was clearly expressed in its obsession with youth culture and reflected widespread, but probably unfounded, fears of a drastic rise in juvenile crime. According to May, "the effort to assert the continuity of republican dreams and vernacular instincts continued to grow, spreading into the fresh realm of an autonomous postwar youth culture."<sup>51</sup> *West Side Story* articulated this anxiety, and its translation from the stage to screen in 1961 marked a significant moment in the trajectory of modernism.

Though it is certainly operative, none of this is to claim that *West Side Story* was an opera in any formal sense – that would be to miss the point. It was the culmination of a transatlantic operatic renovation project whose goal was to subvert the category of "opera." Indeed, Blitzstein is reported to have said, "the Metropolitan Opera – and this means all opera houses of the same type – is a museum of opera. Our theatre is the Broadway theatre."<sup>52</sup> By 1960, Jack Beeson, an American composer of the generation following Bernstein, could see "the end of that decayed form of opera that has for too long in this country masqueraded as *drama per musica*."<sup>53</sup> He eagerly anticipated the

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<sup>49</sup> See Whitfield, 127-151. For example, according to Whitfield, the nomination of the paranoid anti-Communist fable *My Son John* in 1952 "was a cue to HUAC that Hollywood was vigilant." 136.

<sup>50</sup> Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 218.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Anne L. Landau, Lecture notes to "The Contribution of Jewish Composers to the Music of the Modern World," 1946. MBC.

<sup>53</sup> Jack Beeson, "American Opera: Curtains and Overtures," *Columbia University Forum* 3, no. 4 (1960): 20-21.

time when the line separating the musical from opera would be erased. That happened the following year when the modernist subversion and redefinition of opera initiated in Germany forty years earlier was normalized by *West Side Story*.

## CHAPTER 1

### GERMAN OPERATIC REFORM

“We cannot approach opera with the snobbism of indifferent renunciation,” Kurt Weill wrote late in 1925. He continued: “We cannot write operas and at the same time lament the shortcomings of this genre. We cannot view operatic composition as the fulfillment of a purely superficial obligation while we expend our true substance in other forms... without reservation, we must commit ourselves to opera.”<sup>54</sup> Weill addressed this exhortation to the generation of German composers born around 1900, whose artistic maturity had coincided with the defeat of 1918 and the creation of the new Republic. Virtually all had been students of the leaders of the pre-war modernist avant-garde. Krenek and Wilhelm Grosz had studied with Franz Schreker in Vienna, Eisler had been a member of Arnold Schoenberg’s master class at the Berlin Hochschule, and Weill himself had studied with Ferruccio Busoni.

The new generation’s teachers were champions of a new, “absolute” music composed for its own sake and with no direct intended relevance to its audience. This was a music meant to correct the excesses of Wagnerian Romanticism. While their students had taken this rejection of Romanticism to heart, they also rejected the solution, at least as far as opera was concerned. It was time, Weill argued, for his contemporaries to turn away from the “absolute” music of their teachers and compose art for application to the stage. It was not merely a question of transferring the elements of absolute music to

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<sup>54</sup> Kurt Weill, “Commitment to Opera,” in Kim H. Kowalke, *Kurt Weill in Europe*, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1979), 458.



opera, he wrote, “rather the reverse: the dramatic impetus that opera requires can be a very essential component of any musical product.”<sup>55</sup> Opera had to *mean* something if it was to survive.

The 1920s was a protean era in German music when artistic revolutionaries questioned everything, seeking cultural change and rejuvenation to parallel the rebuilding of the German state. In the years immediately following the war, they sought a voice more contemporary than the chromatic Romanticism of Richard Wagner, and more modern even than the atonal experimentations of Schoenberg and his followers. There was a widespread perception of a crisis in opera – the *Opernkrise* – in postwar Germany. In *Opera for a New Republic*, Susan Cook observes that “writers discussed the economic condition of the Republic and its specific effect on opera, the rise of ‘absolute’ music at the expense of dramatic, entertainment media and public sporting events which competed with opera for audiences, the impact of radio and recording technology, and technical issues of operatic production.”<sup>56</sup> The pre-war generation, like Erich Korngold and Richard Strauss, called for a return to Wagnerian traditions and a repudiation of modernist experimentation, but for Weill and his modernist colleagues, that tradition was the main problem. The challenge was not merely to bring about a resumption of German opera composition, but to create a *new* opera that did not look back to pre-war traditions and expressed the *Zeitgeist* of the new age.

In January, 1926, Weill wrote that “our music no longer wishes to express floating atmosphere or nervously exaggerated sentiments, but the powerful emotional complexes of our era. In the transparent clarity of our emotional life lie the possibilities

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Susan C. Cook, *Opera for a New Republic: The Zeitopern of Krenek, Weill, and Hindemith*, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), 10.

for the creation of a new opera; for precisely from this clarity arises the simplicity of musical language that opera demands.”<sup>57</sup> This was a musical language that repudiated the past, emerging from “the realization that people must withdraw as much as possible from the sphere of influence of Richard Wagner.”<sup>58</sup> It also rejected the abstract modernism of Schoenberg’s Second Viennese School as little more than a continuation of bankrupt romanticism.

Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck* is the grandiose conclusion to a development which, based throughout on Wagner and leading beyond French Impressionism and the naturalistic background of *Elektra* to Schoenberg’s tone-color melody [*Klangfarbenmelodie*], here arrives at its zenith in a masterpiece of the strongest power.<sup>59</sup>

Whatever the erstwhile power of the Wagnerian tradition, it had, in Weill’s mind, run its course. The new opera would be based on a simpler, more direct idiom, relevant to a new Germany. Cook notes that the creation of a new, democratic German state provided an opportunity, “even the necessity, to search for new directions and to uncover innovative solutions to age-old problems about the nature and purpose of art.”<sup>60</sup> For Weill and the new generation of German composers, that meant a complete renovation of the opera.

The *Opernkrise* was just part of what the postwar generation of composers perceived as an acute generalized crisis in German music. In a presentation to the Congress of Musical Aesthetics in Karlsruhe in October 1925 Krenek lamented the divergence of “serious” and “light” music. “One can describe these two steadily diverging branches – leaving aside their content for the time being, but taking into account the psychological effect they produce – as either desirable or undesirable music,

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<sup>57</sup> Kurt Weill, “New Opera,” in Kim H. Kowalke, *Kurt Weill in Europe*, 465.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 464.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 465–466.

<sup>60</sup> Cook, 9.

whereby it is naturally understood that the so-called light music is the desirable one.”<sup>61</sup>

Serious music, on the other hand, had evolved into a difficult musical idiom characterized by the complete abandonment of tonality.<sup>62</sup>

Paul Bekker, an influential music critic for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and a kind of ideologue of the new generation, dubbed the atonal experimenters as “Expressionists,” identifying them with unrestrained esoterica of postwar painters like Franz Marc and Oskar Kokoschka. Bekker’s contemporaries, like Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, questioned the whole point of music which appealed only to a small circle of initiates. Writing after the Second World War, he wondered “what can one say for a system which permits highly serious works to be heard only by a tiny group of experts?”<sup>63</sup> The answer for Stuckenschmidt was the artistic direct action of the Berlin Novembergruppe, a collective of artists and writers formed immediately following the War, and named for the month in which the Republic was established in 1918. Founded by architect Erich Mendelsohn and artists Max Pechstein and Wieland Schmied, the Novembergruppe was dedicated to creating a new, socially useful and relevant art for the German people. Musicians and composers were invited to join the group after 1921, and between 1922 and 1931 the Novembergruppe sponsored a number of public recitals usually associated with exhibitions of visual arts.

Weill was one of the first composers to join the Novembergruppe, along with Stuckenschmidt in 1922. Within a few years, the group’s musical rolls included Eisler

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<sup>61</sup> Ernst Krenek, “Music of Today,” trans. Susan C. Cook and Conrad Henderson, in Susan C. Cook, *Opera for a New Republic*, 196-197.

<sup>62</sup> Schoenberg developed the serial or “tone-row” composition technique to provide structure to atonal music. The composer employed a “row” of all of the tones in the chromatic scale without repeating any notes and then developed that theme through harmonic and especially rhythmic variation.

<sup>63</sup> H.H. Stuckenschmidt, *Twentieth Century Music*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York: World University Library, 1969), 114-115.

and Stefan Wolpe, and had featured compositions by Krenek and Paul Hindemith at their concerts, although neither was formally a member. Weill scholar Kim Kowalke notes that, although the composers of the Novembergruppe “did share a common ideal of communication with a wider audience and a desire to educate,”<sup>64</sup> they reflected many political shades and embraced a variety of musical styles. Nevertheless, the Novembergruppe’s social program had an aesthetic corollary in *Neue Sachlichkeit* (literally, “new realism”). Originally a visual art style expounded and promoted by painters like G.F. Hartlaub<sup>65</sup> and Schmied, the term had penetrated to literature and music by the mid-1920s. According to Stephen Hinton, “the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* quickly caught on in other art forms, thus suggesting an aesthetic and cultural correlation, and Hartlaub’s original restriction to painting was soon forgotten.”<sup>66</sup>

The term refers to a “new objectivity” and was an explicit repudiation of the expressionism of Wagnerian Romanticism. In music, as in painting and literature, *Neue Sachlichkeit* called for “an unemotional or nonromantic approach both in form and subject matter, and an obvious interest in everyday life most clearly demonstrated in the choice of texts or the assimilation of popular musical elements.”<sup>67</sup> The goal was to write music that was both direct and meaningful to the Novembergruppe’s new audience. The aesthetic had its critics *within* the group, however, and the term soon became a contested ideological terrain. For Eisler, it was an essentially bourgeois aesthetic that propagated a “contentlessness” musical expression.<sup>68</sup> A political conservative, by the end of the decade

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<sup>64</sup> Kim Kowalke, *Kurt Weill in Europe*, 33.

<sup>65</sup> Hartlaub coined the term for a May 1923 exhibition.

<sup>66</sup> Stephen Hinton, “Weill: *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Surrealism, and *Gebrauchsmusik*,” in Kim Kowalke, ed., *A New Orpheus: Essays on Kurt Weill*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 62.

<sup>67</sup> Cook, 30.

<sup>68</sup> Hinton, 64.

Krenek had found in *Neue Sachlichkeit* the subversion of humanity. He wrote that “‘objectivity’ is a process but not something to express, and to this extent every art, however Romantic, is ‘objective’ if it is good.”<sup>69</sup>

In 1927, the Weimar government, enjoying a period of unprecedented and, it would turn out, short-lived postwar stability founded the Staatsoper am Platz der Republik at the old Kroll Theatre in Berlin. The Krolloper, as it became known, was part of the Republic’s publicly-funded cultural development program. While the old national opera houses, the Staatsoper unter den Linden in central Berlin, and the Städtische Oper in suburban Charlottenberg, focused on conventional performances of the traditional repertoire, the Krolloper, under director Otto Klemperer, who “regarded his tenure at the Krolloper as an opportunity to put new ideas of operatic reform and renewal into practice.”<sup>70</sup> With new, state-funded opera houses also opening in places like Darmstadt and Dessau – the hometown of both the Bauhaus and Weill – young German composers found an unusually receptive market for their works. Moreover, it was the stage that offered the postwar generation with its best opportunity to find an audience. Krenek was of the opinion “that the strongest possibilities in this direction lie in the realm of the theatre... When the curtain goes up in the theatre, we still see the formation of that communal body which is the essential part of any community.”<sup>71</sup>

The result was a new and unique operatic form that aspired to be a “*Spiegel der Zeit*,” a mirror of the times. Whatever its ideological implications, the new objectivity had a profound impact on the aesthetic direction of the burgeoning operatic renovation

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<sup>69</sup> Ernst Krenek, “New Humanity and Old Objectivity,” in *Exploring Music: Essays by Ernst Krenek*, (New York: October House Inc., 1966), 59.

<sup>70</sup> Cook, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Krenek, “Music of Today,” 200-201.

project. *Zeitoper*, as the new form was called, literally means “time-opera.” However, given the intention of mirroring the times, a better definition might be “topical opera” or “opera of the times.” It was associated with the aesthetic program of *Zeitkunst* (“topical art”) which found its expression in literature, theatre and in Berlin’s thriving cabaret scene. *Zeitoper* was, in any case, part of an explicit effort to create an operatic idiom that would be relevant to a new public and supplant bankrupt expressionism, writes Cook:

This self-conscious desire to explore, renew, and create a place for opera in a modern republican age spawned the *Zeitoper*, the product of postwar composers “swollen with new hopes” for the future... All too painfully aware of what had happened to prewar German eternal values, these young composers chose not to write for the future, but instead sought to minister to the here and now.<sup>72</sup>

In effect the operatic extension of the Novembergruppe’s artistic agenda, it attracted many of the composers who had been affiliated with the group’s concert series.

Moreover, *Zeitoper* brought to the opera stage many of the Novembergruppe’s social and aesthetic preoccupations.

*Zeitoper* never had an explicitly enunciated definition, though Stuckenschmidt and Bekker, its principal ideologues, went to great pains to define its broad contours. Stuckenschmidt recalled that *Zeitoper* “were all remarkable for their blend of popular music, highly up-to-date compositional techniques, new-fangled machinery and the depiction of fashionable hero-figures of current mythology.”<sup>73</sup> *Zeitoper*’s dominant aesthetic was *Alltäglichkeit*, an “everyday-ness” inspired by *Neue Sachlichkeit*.<sup>74</sup> The new opera was infused with the ordinary and the mundane, reflecting the modern experiences of both the audience and the composer. In 1935, Bekker wrote:

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<sup>72</sup> Cook, 26.

<sup>73</sup> Stuckenschmidt, 116.

<sup>74</sup> Cook, 24.

The opera-composer must be a singer again, the ideal singer of his music; he must conceive out of the experience and the constant inner consciousness of the living voice. The sound of this living voice must permeate his entire work and be its foundation – that is the inescapable prerequisite of the living opera.<sup>75</sup>

This was manifested in the unprecedented use of non-musical sounds, props and artifacts that conjured the familiar atmosphere of an increasingly technologized and mechanized society. For example, Krenek's 1927 *Jonny Spielt Auf* (*Jonny Strikes Up*) made use of loudspeakers, an automobile, a telephone and rear-projection.<sup>76</sup> In 1930, Krenek wrote that "the technical miracles in *Jonny* were not really miracles, but just perfectly ordinary objects from everyday life (a telephone, a loudspeaker, a train-engine) and as such were merely the props necessary to present a drama growing out of the every-day life of the present."<sup>77</sup>

The demands of capturing the *Zeitgeist* of Weimar Germany on the stage had given rise to an innovative stagecraft. In particular, director Erwin Piscator, along with painter Georg Grosz, journalist Walter Mehring, architect Walter Gropius and dramatist Ernst Toller, developed the *Zeittheater*. This was a theatrical movement parallel to and symbiotic with *Zeitoper* and which would eventually evolve into Piscator's and Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre. Many of Berlin's leading dramatists, including Toller, Brecht and Kurt Tucholsky, had come up through *Kabarett*, postwar Germany's overtly political popular theatre, and it was a logical step to adapt its techniques to topical drama in the theatre. Piscator employed the whole range of multimedia technology then available: dynamic lighting effects, amplified speakers emitted disembodied voices, slides and films

<sup>75</sup> Paul Bekker, *The Changing Opera*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1935), 291.

<sup>76</sup> *Jonny* was revived at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig. A recording of the production was released as part of Decca's *Entartete Musik* series. See Ernst Krenek, *Jonny Spielt Auf*, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Lothar Zagrosek, Decca 436 631-2, 2 CD.

<sup>77</sup> Krenek, "From *Jonny* to *Orest*," 23.

played on screen hung behind or above the stage. These techniques were widely used in *Zeitoper*. The original 1927 production of *Jonny*, for example, used an animated film to create an illusion of movement.<sup>78</sup> Hindemith achieved a similarly cinematic effect in his one-act opera *Hin und zurück* (*There and Back*) by having some scenes performed backward in imitation of a film running in reverse.

A key characteristic of the new opera was its subject matter which, on one hand, sought to evoke “everyday-ness,” but also sought to be as topical as the political *Kabarette*. The staples of German Expressionist opera had long followed in the Wagnerian tradition of mythological or Romantic-historical subject matter. Strauss’s *Elektra* and *Salome* and Korngold’s *Das Wunder der Heliane* (*The Wonder of Heliane*) have their clear antecedents in Wagner’s *Parsifal* and *Ring* cycle. However, the new generation found mythological subjects inappropriate for *modern* opera. Writing to his publisher in 1925, shortly before the *Zeitoper* movement began, Hindemith complained about the paucity of really modern material in postwar operas:

With the best will in the world one cannot give the things that are being performed in theatres as contemporary opera today the name of modern opera. It is the same old sauce over and over again, just stirred around a bit differently.<sup>79</sup>

What Hindemith wanted was a libretto almost literally ripped from the front pages of the daily news. In his 1927 one-act opera *Hin und zurück*, a man murders his wife over breakfast. In 1928, Hindemith composed *Neues vom Tage* (*News of the Day*), a full-scale *Zeitoper* to a libretto by Marcellus Schiffer.<sup>80</sup> A commentary on the emerging mass

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<sup>78</sup> Cook, 89.

<sup>79</sup> Paul Hindemith to the Schott-Verlag, 20 June 1925, in *Selected Letters of Paul Hindemith*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 39.

<sup>80</sup> This is available on CD. See Paul Hindemith, *Neues vom Tage*, Chor der Staatlichen Hochschule für Musik, Köln, Das Kölner Rundfunkorchester, Jan Latham König, Wergo WER 6192-2, 2 CD.



media and the Republic's newly-passed marriage laws, *Neues* tells of a bourgeois couple named Eduard and Laura who decide – once again, over breakfast – to get a divorce. The case turns ugly, the couple's troubles become a media *cause célèbre*, and they are hired by a theatre manager to act out their story in a nightly *Kabarett*. As the last act closes, Eduard and Laura have reconciled, but they are unable to return to a normal life. They have become the property of the mass media; their names remain in headlines for everyone to read, along with other news of the day.

In musical terms, the new opera borrowed heavily from *Kabarettrevue*, the musical form of *Kabarett*. Berlin's numerous bars and nightclubs provided a ready source of income for young composers in the 1920s. Wilhelm Grosz composed extensively for the *Kabarett*, and Weill earned some extra money playing piano in a seedy bar while studying at Berlin's Hochschule.<sup>81</sup> The young composers found inspiration in the *Kabarettrevue*'s raucous dance rhythms and popular songs. Like *Kabarettrevue*, *Zeitoper*, typically dispensed with, or greatly truncated, orchestral overtures and replaced sung recitatives with spoken dialogue.

Above all, the composers were exposed to the new tonalities and rhythms of jazz, broadcast from London's Savoy Hotel, and performed by touring ensembles and American musicians who had remained in Europe after the war, including Sidney Bechet, James Reese Europe, and the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. *Zeitoper* sought to incorporate dance and popular music to reflect the spirit of the new Germany and, Weill wrote in 1926, nothing embodied modern times quite like jazz. Indeed, he wrote, "The rhythm of our time is jazz."<sup>82</sup> Weill expressed his colleagues' admiration of and

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<sup>81</sup> Jürgen Schebera, *Kurt Weill: An Illustrated Life*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 37.

<sup>82</sup> Weill, "Dance Music," in Kim H. Kowalke, *Kurt Weill in Europe*, 473.

fascination for the American genre. There simply was nothing else like it in Germany: “Negro music, which constitutes the source of the jazz band, is full of complexity of rhythm, harmonic precision, auditory and modulatory richness, which our dance bands simply cannot achieve.”<sup>83</sup> Jazz instrumentation, specifically the use of saxophones and drum kit, found its way into the orchestra pit.

However, jazz was only part of *Amerikanismus* (Americanism), a generalized fascination with all things American. In the opera and theatre of the period, an imagined “America” stood for modernity itself. Piscator’s wife, the actress and dancer Maria Ley, later recalled that the creators of *Zeittheater* “invented ‘America.’”

Everything that was useful, effective, expedient, operative, performing properly and instrumental for production, was called American. Even time had an American tempo and was valued as such. None of them had ever seen America, any more than had the Romantic writers a hundred years before. But these twentieth century rebels did not just admire America, the beauty of it, its landscape, its exoticism, its virginal purity. They admired what seemed real to them: the objective existence of the land of plenty, its material genius, with its prosperity, its slogans, and the great god – the machine.<sup>84</sup>

*Amerikanismus* was explicit in the new opera; it could not be plainer in *Jonny*, considered by Stuckenschmidt to be the first “jazz opera,”<sup>85</sup> and whose central character is a German composer seduced by the New World. In the third act finale of *Neues vom Tage*, “Kino! Zirkus! Theater! Variété!” (Cinema! Circus! Theatre! Variety!) the theatre manager offers Eduard and Laura the riches of an American tour. Weill’s work with Brecht reflects similar preoccupation; though not strictly *Zeitopern*, the “Alabama Song” of his 1927 *Mahagonny* is sung in English, and 1933’s *Die sieben Todsünden* (*The Seven*

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Maria Ley-Piscator, *The Piscator Experiment: The Political Theatre*, (New York: James H. Heineman Inc., 1967), 26.

<sup>85</sup> Stuckenschmidt, 115.

*Deadly Sins*) is saturated with American references. African-American culture – literature as well as jazz – also had a profound impact at this time. Grosz, a veteran of the *Kabarettrevue*, and composer of a one-act *Zeitoper*, composed his *Afrika-Songs* to the text of *Afrika Singt*, a collection of poems by African-American poets including Langston Hughes, translated into German for publication in 1930.<sup>86</sup>

*Zeitoper* itself was a short-lived movement, however. It was closely tied to the optimism and hope for renewal embodied in the Weimar Republic, but the German economic crisis following 1929, and the subsequent collapse of the Republic, seemed to make it irrelevant. According to Cook, “as the economy worsened, such positive feelings toward modern life and the Republic vanished.”<sup>87</sup> The economy fell into a tailspin, the opera audience contracted, and the Weimar government shut down the Krolloper in the summer of 1931, citing financial reasons. In the ensuing political instability, some of the leading composers of the postwar generation withdrew from the topicality and modernism of *Zeitoper*. By 1931, Krenek had retreated to a more Expressionist idiom similar to the Second Viennese School. His later operas, *Leben des Orest* (*The Life of Orestes*, 1930) and *Karl V* in (1933), though hardly Romantic musically, were a return to traditional operatic subject matter. Hindemith’s 1935 opera *Mathis der Maler* (*Matthias the Painter*) was “thoroughly grounded in older German operatic tradition, even more so than Krenek’s *Leben des Orest* or *Karl V*.”<sup>88</sup> Part of this was doubtless due to Hindemith’s decision to remain in Germany under the Third Reich. By 1934, he was

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<sup>86</sup> In the United States, Grosz became a successful composer of popular songs. His hits included “Red Sails in the Sunset” and “The Santa Fe Trail.” *Afrika Songs* was first recorded in 1997 as part of Decca Records’s *Entartete Kunst* series. See Wilhelm Grosz, *Afrika Songs*, Matrix Ensemble, Robert Ziegler, London 455 116-2, CD.

<sup>87</sup> Cook, 6.

<sup>88</sup> Cook, 171.

anxious to make a good impression on Adolf Hitler's notoriously conservative musical tastes:

It is obvious that "Neues vom Tage" shocked the Führer greatly. I shall write him a letter (F. was very taken with this idea) in which I shall ask him to convince himself of the contrary and perhaps visit us some time here in the school, where I would have the cantata from the Plöner Musiktag performed for him – no one has ever been able to resist that.<sup>89</sup>

Hindemith failed to impress the Führer. He was denounced by Goebbels later that year. In 1938, Hindemith joined most of his colleagues in exile when his wife's Jewish parentage was made public at the Nazis' *Entartete Musik* (degenerate music) exhibition of "musical Bolshevism."

With their more conservative colleagues having retreated, Weill and Eisler took the aesthetic programs of the Novembergruppe and *Zeitoper* several steps further, out of the opera house, into the popular theatres and, in Eisler's case, into the streets. Weill was never comfortable with the term *Zeitoper*. While he subscribed to its aesthetic aims, and composed at least one opera, *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren* (*The Czar Sits for a Photograph*), that explicitly employed its principles, he found the term both confining and superficial. In 1928, the journal *Melos*, decided that Weill's *Mahagonny* was the foremost exemplar of *Zeitoper*, and invited the composer to elucidate the artform. Weill responded by rejecting the label, while embracing *Zeitkunst*, the whole range of topical and political art.

This word "*Zeitoper*" has also had to suffer the unfortunate transformation from concept to slogan. It was just as hastily coined as it was incorrectly employed. This hasty, premature, incorrect utilization of a concept is not absolutely detrimental; it is perhaps necessary because it might allow a subsequent application to appear with the kind of naturalness that creates the correct conditions for its public acceptance... Man in our time looks

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<sup>89</sup> Hindemith, Letter to Willy Strecker, 18 November 1934, in *Selected Letters of Paul Hindemith*, 85. "F." was the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler.

different, and what drives him outwardly and motivates him inwardly should not be so portrayed for the mere purpose of being current at any price or in the interest of topicality which holds validity only for the narrowest time span of its creation.<sup>90</sup>

Weill's interest extended far beyond the confines of the traditional opera venue. Opera, conceived as an aristocratic genre, remained socially exclusive. Even *Zeitoper* was an art form intended for an essentially bourgeois audience, and the opera remained "in splendid isolation." Moreover, the opera audience "still represents a closed group of people who seemingly stand apart from the large theatrical audience," Weill wrote. "'Opera' and 'theater' are still treated as two entirely distinct concepts." The only way to eliminate the socially exclusive character of opera was to adopt the "socially creative" direction taken by the modern German theatre. And if the operatic framework could not be adapted, Weill wrote, then "quite certainly that framework must be exploded."<sup>91</sup>

It is perhaps ironic, then, that Weill's first opera was *about* the theatre. Set in Elizabethan England with a libretto by Expressionist playwright Georg Kaiser, based on his 1920 play, *Der Protagonist* (*The Protagonist*) could only be called a *Zeitoper* at a stretch.<sup>92</sup> The one-act opera tells of the leader – the Protagonist – of an itinerant troupe of actors who are engaged to perform a pantomime for a nobleman. The Protagonist has become so immersed in his art that he can no longer distinguish the fictional world of his drama from reality and, during a performance, murders his sister, his last link to the real world. With *Der Protagonist*, Weill was transformed overnight from a musical unknown with a handful of instrumental works and a minor ballet to his credit, into a messiah of

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<sup>90</sup> Weill, "Zeitoper," in Kim H. Kowalke, *Kurt Weill in Europe*, 482.

<sup>91</sup> Weill, "Correspondence about *Die Dreigroschenoper*," in Kim H. Kowalke, *Kurt Weill in Europe*, 487.

<sup>92</sup> There is only one recording of *Der Protagonist* currently available. See Kurt Weill, *Der Protagonist*, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, John Mauceri, Capriccio 60 086, CD.

German opera. Writing in the *Berliner Morgenpost*, the influential music critic Rudolf Kastner raved that “Kurt Weill has entered the first rank of our great hopes.”<sup>93</sup>

However, Weill only began to adopt the topicality of *Zeitkunst* in his 1925 cantata *Der neue Orpheus*, to a text by Ivan Goll. Orpheus is violinist in a *Kabarettrevue* who searches the world for his Euridice, who has become a prostitute. Cook observes that “as Goll’s text describes modern life and popular entertainments – the *Kabarett*, suburban movie houses, Yankee girls, the gramophone, and the circus – it was natural for Weill to employ topical musical idioms.”<sup>94</sup> *Der Neue Orpheus* premiered along with the one-act opera *Royal Palace*, also to a text by Goll, at the Krolloper in March, 1927. Weill had begun to make greater use of popular music forms in *Royal Palace*, and Foster Hirsch notes that it was “a cautious step in his gradual release from a densely contrapuntal style steeped in expressionist dissonance.”<sup>95</sup> If *Royal Palace* was a cautious step, then Weill’s subsequent works were an enthusiastic leap into the new world.

Of all of his works, Weill’s 1928 one-act opera *Der Zar* fits most comfortably in the framework of *Zeitoper*. Composed to a libretto by Kaiser, it was a political farce about an attempt to assassinate the Czar of a fictional country in a Paris photo studio.<sup>96</sup> As in his previous operatic work, and similar to *Jonny* and *Neues*, Weill composed the music for *Der Zar* as an organic whole. In terms of its structure, it was very much an opera that Wagner would understand. However, Weill’s partnership with Brecht would change that. In 1927, Weill was looking for a libretto for a commission from the Baden-

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<sup>93</sup> Rudolf Kastner, “Kaiser Transformed into Opera,” *Berliner Morgenpost*, 29 March 1926, quoted in Schebera, 70.

<sup>94</sup> Cook, 118.

<sup>95</sup> Foster Hirsch, *Kurt Weill on Stage: From Berlin to Broadway*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 24.

<sup>96</sup> Although the plot is a strong echo of the execution of Czar Nicholas II in 1918, there is no indication whether this event was a direct inspiration.

Baden Festival for a short opera. He was unenthusiastic about writing another one-act opera, but seized on the opportunity to set Brecht's five, recently-published *Mahagonnygesänge* (*Mahagonny Songs*) instead. It would be a watershed in his career.

At that time, Brecht was the *enfant terrible* of Germany's literary left. With Piscator, he had developed a new dramatic form – the Epic Theatre – out of the *Zeittheater*. In the Epic Theatre, “the spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically... by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play.”<sup>97</sup> It was essential that actors not become their characters, they were to be understood as actors *portraying* characters. Music could have an important role in the Epic Theatre, but it was a “gestic” music, that did not reflect the action but *was* the action itself. According to Brecht, this was “music which allows the actor to exhibit certain basic gestures on the stage.”<sup>98</sup> Weill was more explicit: “Music has the potential to define the basic tone and fundamental *gestus* of an event to the extent that at least an incorrect interpretation will be avoided, while it still allows the actor abundant opportunity for deployment of his own individuality of style.”<sup>99</sup> Music was not to be bound by the text and was not hidden within the theatrical production, but was separated from it, with the orchestra visible on stage, and with lighting changes signaling that the drama had become song.<sup>100</sup>

In bringing the aesthetic principles of *Zeitoper* together with the Epic Theatre, Weill felt he was finally able to create a living opera. Epic Theatre was “that form of

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<sup>97</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction,” *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen & Co., 1964), 71.

<sup>98</sup> Brecht, “On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre,” *Brecht on Theatre*, 87.

<sup>99</sup> Weill, “Concerning the Gestic Character of Music,” in Kim H. Kowalke, *Kurt Weill in Europe*, 492.

<sup>100</sup> Brecht, “On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre,” 85.

theater which seems to me to offer the only possible basis for opera in our time.”<sup>101</sup> He had wanted to liberate opera from its restrictions, and in Brecht, he had found the perfect, if difficult collaborator. Writing of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (*The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*), the full-length opera that they would develop from their initial *Mahagonny* collaboration, Brecht pointed out that Weill’s music “is not purely gestic; but many parts of it are, enough anyway for it to represent a serious threat to the common type of opera, which in its current manifestations we can call the purely culinary opera.”<sup>102</sup> To Brecht, *Mahagonny* was “as culinary as ever,” but its whole point was to subvert opera and attack “the society that needs operas of such a sort; it still perches happily on the old bough, perhaps, but at least it has started (out of absent-mindedness or bad conscience) to saw it through.”<sup>103</sup>

Weill and Brecht dubbed the 25-minute work *Mahagonny Songspiel*, a deliberate effort to identify the work with the traditional *Singspiel* or “song-play” of early German opera.<sup>104</sup> In its retreat from the all-encompassing Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* – the compositional technique that treated an opera as a single unified work – which had defined German opera since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Mahagonny* evoked the spirit of *Singspiel*. It was a return to the “number-opera” format employed by Mozart and Weber. Both the *Songspiel* and the opera were collections of discrete arias or songs, manifesting the episodic character of Epic Theatre.

Another departure from high-operatic convention was the decision to cast Weill’s wife Lotte Lenya to sing “Alabama Song.” An accomplished actress of the *Kabarett* and

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<sup>101</sup> Weill, “Concerning the Gestic Character of Music,” 491.

<sup>102</sup> Brecht, “On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre,” 87.

<sup>103</sup> Brecht, “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” *Brecht on Theatre*, 41.

<sup>104</sup> *Mahagonny Songspiel* is available on CD. See Kurt Weill, *Die Sieben Todsünden / Mahagonny Songspiel*, RIAS Berlin Sinfonietta, John Mauceri, Decca 430 168-2, CD.



musical stage, she was nonetheless not a trained opera singer. Orchestrated for an eight-piece ensemble modeled on a contemporary jazz band, the premiere of *Mahagonny* in July 1928 met with puzzlement. Weill biographer Ronald Taylor notes that, as the audience greeted *Mahagonny* “with a mingled chime of cheers and boos, so the critics, in no less of a state of shock, went their separate ways.”<sup>105</sup> According to Jürgen Schebera, *Mahagonny* received mixed reviews: “only a few critics understood that the door had been opened to a whole new kind of musical theatre.”<sup>106</sup> Weill and Brecht began work on the full *Mahagonny* opera shortly after the *Songspiel*’s Baden-Baden premiere. Its opening in Leipzig in 1930 was a chilling foretaste of the future of German opera: the performance ended in a riot orchestrated by a rabble of Nazi Brownshirts.

Weill had found a unique voice for the musical stage, and with Brecht he had developed a new form: not quite opera, but certainly operatic. The *Dreigroschenoper* (*Threepenny Opera*) of 1929 was its first full-length application.<sup>107</sup> Based on John Gay’s 1728 *Beggars Opera*, which had had a successful revival in London in 1928, the *Dreigroschenoper* essentially moved Gay’s cast of murderers, pimps, prostitutes, slumming bourgeois and crooked cops to a setting reminiscent of late-Weimar Berlin. This was political Epic Theatre in all its glory.

The *Threepenny Opera* is concerned with bourgeois conceptions not only as content, by representing them, but also through the manner in which it

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<sup>105</sup> Ronald Taylor, *Kurt Weill: Composer in a Divided World*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 115.

<sup>106</sup> Schebera, 99.

<sup>107</sup> Brecht and Weill began the full-length version of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* in 1928, but it was not completed until 1930. Sony Music re-released the 1956 recording, which includes much of the original cast, in 2003. See Kurt Weill, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, Norddeutscher Radio Chor, Norddeutscher Radio Orchester, Wilhelm Brückner-Rüggeberg, Sony Classical SM2K 91184, 2 CD. Also see Kurt Weill, *The Threepenny Opera*, RIAS Kammerchor, RIAS Berlin Sinfonietta, John Mauceri, Decca 430 075-2, CD.

does so. It is a kind of report on life as any member of the audience would like to see it.<sup>108</sup>

The *Dreigroschenoper* not only sawed through the roots of opera, it was the fullest manifestation of the musical theatre proposed by the *Mahagonny Songspiel*. Reviews of the opera's premiere on August 31, 1928 at Berlin's Theater am Schiffbauerdamm were mixed, and tended to split along Germany's increasingly polarized political lines. The Nazi press attacked the *Dreigroschenoper*, the Left hailed it, and most critics scratched their heads. However, it was a smash hit, playing at the Schiffbauerdamm to packed houses for the entire 1928-1929 season, with simultaneous productions elsewhere in Europe.

Weill had intended the *Dreigroschenoper* to be as much an opera as anything else, while fundamentally subverting the genre. Most telling was the explicit decision to cast non-operatic singers. According to Hirsch, "there wasn't an operatic trace in the voices of any of the actors."<sup>109</sup> The songs themselves were composed in a direct, non-dramatic idiom. They were meant to be understood and easily sung in the manner of *Gebrauchsmusik*, a politically-charged aesthetic that had grown directly from the Novembergruppe's original program. The term literally means "music for use" – music with specific social application that could be easily understood and enjoyed by a mass audience. Weill believed that: "the boundaries between 'art music' and 'music for use' must be brought closer and gradually eliminated."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Brecht, "The Literarization of the Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre*, 43.

<sup>109</sup> Hirsch, 35.

<sup>110</sup> Weill, "Opera – Where to?" in Kim H. Kowalke, *Kurt Weill in Europe*, 506.

Weill categorized most of his work from *Mahagonny Songspiel* until his departure from Germany in 1933 as *Gebrauchsmusik*.<sup>111</sup> He composed *Der Flug der Lindberghs* (*The Lindbergh Flight*) to a text by Brecht for radio in 1929. It was a *Gebrauchsmusik* with an explicitly didactic purpose, and Brecht wrote that it was “valueless unless learned from. It has no value as art which would justify any performance not intended for learning.”<sup>112</sup>

By the time the full version of *Mahagonny* came to the stage in 1930, Weill and Brecht were already falling out. Appropriately enough, their last full-scale collaboration was 1929’s *Happy End*, a play by Elizabeth Hauptmann, the playwright’s assistant and amanuensis, with lyrics by Brecht himself. The playwright’s insistence that music should be always subservient to the text didn’t sit well with Weill. According to Hirsch, “as the arguments over music vs. words escalated, Brecht called Weill ‘a phony Richard Strauss’ and threatened to push him down a flight of stairs.”<sup>113</sup> At the same time, the two men’s politics – Weill was never as radical – diverged, with Brecht drawing ever closer to a radical Marxist position. By the end of 1930 the partnership had dissolved.

Brecht found an ideal partner in Hanns Eisler. One of the original Novembergruppe composers, along with Weill, Eisler’s politics had followed a similar path to Brecht’s. By 1931, he was committed to creating a new, proletarian *Gebrauchsmusik*. He saw in the postwar rejection of musical tradition the seeds of a revolutionary culture.

The all-embracing character of the bourgeois music business has been destroyed and finally removed. On the ruins of this music culture room has finally been made for the struggle of the workers for a new music

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<sup>111</sup> Hinton, 71.

<sup>112</sup> Brecht, “An Example of Pedagogics,” *Brecht on Theatre*, 31.

<sup>113</sup> Hirsch, 90.

culture corresponding to their class situation which, today, is already beginning to take on a clear shape.<sup>114</sup>

Writing as a member of the revolutionary working class, Eisler saw music as an essential part of the class struggle: “we must propagate the practice of an art which takes its new methods from the daily struggles of the revolutionary workers.”<sup>115</sup> Those methods were the mass song and political theatre.

Brecht had worked with Eisler before, on a setting of his “Ballade vom Soldaten” (“Ballad of the Soldier”) in 1928, and the composer’s emergence as a spokesman for a new revolutionary music in the early 1930s made him the ideal partner. In 1932, Eisler wrote that “the workers’ music movement must be clear about the new function of their music, which is to activate their members for struggle and to encourage political education.” Everything was secondary to this goal, and “all music forms and techniques must be developed to suit the express purpose, that is the class struggle.”<sup>116</sup> This approach doubtless appealed to Brecht, and in 1931, he had Eisler compose music for *Die Mutter*, his adaptation of Maxim Gorky’s *The Mother*.<sup>117</sup> It was the climax of *Gebrauchsmusik*, but following its premiere in 1932, and with the rise of National Socialism, the days of revolutionary music were numbered. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, both Eisler and Brecht became fugitives.

They were not alone. Kurt Weill’s latest work, *Der Silbersee* (*Silverlake*), was scheduled to open on the night of February 18, 1933 at Leipzig’s Altes Theater, with

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<sup>114</sup> Hanns Eisler, “The Builders of a New Music Culture,” *Hanns Eisler, A Rebel in Music: Selected Writings*, ed. Manfred Grabs, trans. Marjorie Meyer (London: Kahn & Averill, 1999), 38-39.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>116</sup> Eisler, “Our Revolutionary Music,” 59.

<sup>117</sup> *Die Mutter* has been rarely recorded. See Hanns Eisler, *Die Mutter*, Coro della Radio Svizzera, Diego Fasolis, Chandos CHAN 9820, CD.

simultaneous openings in Magdeburg and Erfurt.<sup>118</sup> With *Der Silbersee*, Weill had come full circle; the text was by Kaiser, the librettist for his first opera *Der Protagonist*. The performances in Erfurt and Magdeburg were shut down after a few days due to noisy and sometimes violent pro-Nazi protests. On February 27, the Reichstag burned down, and everything changed. The Nazi government closed down the Leipzig production on March 4. On March 21, three days before the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act, Weill, Caspar and Erika Neher escaped to France. Within two years, Krenek had returned to his native Austria and escaped to the United States following the *Anschluss* in 1938. Hindemith escaped to Switzerland in 1938. The operatic renovation project had ended in Germany.

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<sup>118</sup> *Der Silbersee* is available on CD. See Kurt Weill, *Der Silbersee*, London Sinfonietta, Markus Stenz, RCA Victor Red Seal 09026-63447-2, 2 CD.

## CHAPTER 2

### AMERICAN MODERNISM

“A renaissance of opera is at hand,” wrote George Antheil, one of the United States’ leading modernist composers, in the summer of 1930. He continued: “A few years ago, the opera houses of Europe were dying in their own dust, maintaining, towards no end, huge and costly personnels. Today, in spite of recent theater-crises, nearly every one of them is a live and going institution with box-office receipts, a direction and a soul.”<sup>119</sup> The agent of this renaissance, he wrote, was *Zeitoper* and the new, radical modern style – the “young German school” – that had emerged in Germany. One example, Antheil wrote, was “Weill’s *Beggar’s Opera*, which was a sensational success throughout Germany and is now being played everywhere in Europe, even in reactionary centers like Rome.”<sup>120</sup>

As in Germany, the American opera was due for renovation, for many of the same reasons. The early American musical stage, writes Mates, was dominated by comic and ballad opera in the British tradition, but “grand opera began to achieve a certain snob value and split off from comic opera in terms of its audience appeal.”<sup>121</sup> Serious opera became stereotypical “highbrow” art, writes Lawrence W. Levine, performed in opulent opera houses “in isolation from other forms of entertainment to an audience that was far more homogeneous than those which had gathered earlier.”<sup>122</sup> By the start of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Antheil, “Wanted – Opera By and For Americans,” 12.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>121</sup> Mates, 59.

<sup>122</sup> Levine, 101.

century, it “was no longer part and parcel of the eclectic blend of culture that had characterized the United States.”<sup>123</sup> Mates sees “grand opera becoming a cultivated art, even as America’s musical stage, the comic opera, becomes a popular one.”<sup>124</sup> Moreover, this cultivated art was almost completely dominated by the European repertoire. Opera companies specialized in works by Verdi, Donizetti, Bellini and, later, Puccini. The few American composers whose work made it to the stage composed derivative works in the European idiom. One of the first successes was William Henry Fry’s 1845 opera *Leonora*. Elise K. Kirk notes, however, that “the basic story was not all that new, nor were the lyrical sounds of Bellini and Donizetti that shaped Fry’s musical style.”<sup>125</sup> By the end of the century, however, the opera was well-enough established in the United States to attract Puccini and Gustav Mahler.

Yet, observed Antheil, it remained alien to most Americans and despite the efforts of composers like Frederick Grant Gleason and Walter Damrosch – who, like their contemporaries, composed in a Wagnerian style – an authentic American voice had yet to emerge. The American opera was, he wrote, dominated by Europe and by Europeans. Antheil had no doubt “that a large share of the dissipation of our energies is due to the rafts of ultra-conservative European musicians who have flocked to our shore in past decades, ensconced themselves in positions of power and trust, and betrayed a good deal of the musical future of America.”<sup>126</sup> Antheil defined the project; he exhorted his colleagues to liberate the opera from the opera hall and take it to “Broadway and in the legitimate theatres.” He challenged a new generation of American composers to re-define

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>124</sup> Mates, 60.

<sup>125</sup> Elise K. Kirk, *American Opera*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 83.

<sup>126</sup> Antheil, “Wanted – Opera By and For Americans,” 13.

the opera for a new, mass audience that, conditioned “by the rapidity of the movie-screen and the real excellence of the contemporary legitimate theatre, will put up with no démodé, ‘artistic,’ operatic monkey business. The composers will have to get to work without too much accessory baggage. In this way only, I am convinced, can we soon have a real American school of opera.”<sup>127</sup>

The generation of composers whom Antheil addressed was well-prepared to accept the challenge by 1930. Many were well-established in the United States and Europe, and virtually all of them – Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, Henry Cowell, Israel Citkowitz, Marc Blitzstein and others – had benefited from a rigorous education in modern composition with Nadia Boulanger at the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau. Boulanger, herself a former student of Gabriel Fauré’s, was a leading player in French neo-classicism, a musical style pioneered by Igor Stravinsky. Neo-classicism stressed formal purity, clarity and precision over emotional expressionism. Copland would later describe the style as “the logical end of the movement that began with a small group of obscure Russians in the eighteen seventies – the desire to free music from the strangle hold of German romanticism.”<sup>128</sup> According to Nicholas Tawa, most of the young Americans in Europe “would return with a French-Stravinsky veneer layered over whatever was American in their expression.”<sup>129</sup>

Antheil was something of an exception. Although he was deeply influenced by Stravinsky’s neo-Classicism in particular and European modernism in general, he was never a formal member of the group of American Conservatory students who styled

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>128</sup> Aaron Copland, *Our New Music: Leading Composers in Europe and America*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1941), 106.

<sup>129</sup> Nicholas Tawa, *American Composers and their Public: A Critical Look*, (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1995). 5.



themselves “the boulangerie” after their mentor. However, Antheil was the first American composer to immerse himself in European modernism and to take up the challenge, though he ultimately failed, of defining a uniquely *American* modernism.

He had made an early impression in the United States as a piano prodigy, after having studied with Constantin von Sternberg and Ernest Bloch. In 1921, Antheil secured financial support from Mary Curtis Bok, heiress to Cyrus Curtis’s publishing empire, for a European concert tour in return for a brief teaching engagement at her Philadelphia Settlement Music School, the forerunner of the Curtis Institute. Bok was Antheil’s patron for the rest of his career, both in the United States and in Europe, and the following year, with generous support from his benefactor, he began his European tour. Antheil would remain in Europe almost continually for most of the decade, meeting his musical idol Stravinsky in Berlin, and settling into the American expatriate community that grew around the American Conservatory.

Paris in the 1920s was an enormously fertile environment for the young American. His social circle included Wyndham Lewis, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, a generation of expatriate writers who, Malcolm Cowley recalled, were “trying to change the world and create the future; it was the special pride and presumption of the period.”<sup>130</sup> It was a time when proponents of a Dadaist revolution “believed that the new artist had freed himself from the limitations of the old artistic mediums.”<sup>131</sup> The Paris musical scene was overflowing with experiments by modernist composers like Stravinsky and Erik Satie, often working together with artists in other media. In 1924, the composers collectively known as *les six* – Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Arthur Honegger,

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<sup>130</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *Exile’s Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1975; New York: The Viking Press, 1951), 11.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

Germaine Taillefer, Georges Auric and Louis Durey – collaborated on *Les mariés de la Tour Eiffel*,<sup>132</sup> a pantomime-ballet to a scenario by Jean Cocteau. Antheil found the environment amazingly stimulating. In a letter to Bok in 1926, he raved about the Paris audience's enthusiastic reception for his *Symphony in Fa*.

Briefly, I have given the most successful concert of my life. Everyone was there, including Koussevitsky in a box, and there was standing room only in the enormous Champs Elysées Theatre which seats 2500 people. I say "enormous" from the modern viewpoint... If you know Paris, or any town for that matter, you will know that an audience of 2500 to hear a new unproved modern thing is absolutely phenomenal. This does not mean a "proved" modern thing such as the "Sacre du Printemps"!<sup>133</sup>

Antheil was the rising star in a city crowded with musical geniuses, and he knew it. He observed, not without truth, that "All young Paris is beginning to regard me as the young music Messiah: my concerts are crowded, and Strawinsky's premieres are not..... the MOMENT HAS COME TO STRIKE AND STRIKE HARD."<sup>134</sup> This was no idle boast. In a survey of the new generation of American composers for *Modern Music*, Copland, himself a rising star, wrote that "Antheil is all they claim and more; one needn't be particularly astute to realize that he possesses the greatest gifts of any young American now writing."<sup>135</sup>

Antheil struck hard in 1926 with a radically percussive work for 16 synchronized player pianos, xylophones and percussion entitled *Ballet Mécanique*.<sup>136</sup> Originally conceived as the soundtrack to an experimental film of the same title by Fernand Léger

<sup>132</sup> Durey had left the group by this time to focus his energies on proletarian and revolutionary music.

<sup>133</sup> Antheil to Mary Curtis Bok, June 1926, George Antheil Collection (GAC), Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC, box 1.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Aaron Copland, "The Younger Generation of American Composers," in *Aaron Copland: A Reader*, Richard Kostelanetz, ed., (London: Routledge, 2004), 173.

<sup>136</sup> A recording of the 1953 arrangement for four pianos and percussion ensemble is available on CD. See George Antheil, *Ballet Mécanique*, Philadelphia Virtuosi Chamber Orchestra, dir. Daniel Spalding, Naxos 8.559060, CD.

and Man Ray, the *Ballet* was to be the first of a new musical form with the same angular contours of modern painting. Writing to music historian Nicolas Slonimsky a decade later, Antheil insisted that this new approach to music consisted of “the filling out of a certain time canvas with musical abstractions and sound material composed and contrasted against one another with the thought of time values rather than tonal values.”<sup>137</sup> Copland commented that the Ballet, “with its use of numerous mechanical pianos and electrical appliances, takes on the aspect of a visionary experiment.”<sup>138</sup> It was a highly abstract approach to new music, and the *Ballet*’s opening night was a sensation reminiscent of the first performance of Stravinsky’s *Sacre du Printemps* five years before. The audience included James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Marcel Duchamp and a star-struck Copland who described the evening to his friend and fellow composer Citkowitz. Antheil, he wrote, “proceeded to out-sack the *Sacre* with the aid of a Pleyela and amplifiers, ventilators, buzzers and other what-nots... the *Ballet Mécanique* brought forth the usual near-riot and everyone went home content.”<sup>139</sup> Legend has it that Antheil held the mob back with a revolver.

The *Ballet* assured Antheil’s reputation as the musical *enfant terrible* of Paris for a time, and he confidently wrote his patron that her investment in him was paying great dividends.

I am honestly getting the most tremendous following in Paris. Practically all of the young French intellectuals are on my side, and I really have piles of enthusiasts of all kinds and nationalities. If this keeps up for several years I shall usurp Strawinsky's place... at any rate, I can boast I have as

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<sup>137</sup> Antheil to Nicolas Slonimsky, 27 July 1936, Nicolas Slonimsky Collection (NSC), Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC, box 129, folder 57.

<sup>138</sup> Copland, “The Younger Generation of American Composers,” 173.

<sup>139</sup> Copland to Israel Citkowitz, July 12, 1926, in *Aaron Copland: A Reader*, 311-312.

large a paying audience... at the moment. These things are styles... perhaps next year I will be out of fashion. But I won't be.<sup>140</sup>

For all his bravado, however, Antheil was unable to sustain the enthusiasm provoked by his *Ballet*. He began work on a neo-classical symphony, a piano concerto and a string quartet later in 1926, only to abandon them before completion.

However, with the success of *Ballet Mécanique* and the *Symphony in Fa*, Antheil became the focal point of the growing American modernist community in Paris. Copland and Thomson, seeking the same inspiration of European modernism that had attracted Antheil in 1921, followed in 1925 and 1926. He soon found himself in an artistic community crowded with Americans. In practical terms that provided Antheil with a ready-made source of support in the rambunctious Parisian music scene. He wrote to Mary Curtis Bok that “the most talented of the young American group of composers, Virgil Thomson, a frank disciple and imitator of Satie and the modern French school has come out openly in my van.”<sup>141</sup>

At the same time, and perhaps partly due to the growing American community in Paris, Antheil's music took an intentionally American turn. Indeed, in 1933, he wrote to Slonimsky that “all of my direction since 1927 is absolutely American.”<sup>142</sup> That year, Antheil began work on *Transatlantic*, a modern opera, in a modern setting, and he had no doubt about the importance of the work. In early 1928, he informed Bok “I have just finished the first American grand opera that takes place in the present day.... a huge score, taking two and a half hours to play. It is, as all opera must be, essentially melodic; but,

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<sup>140</sup> Antheil to Bok, 12 October 1926, GAC, box 1.

<sup>141</sup> Antheil to Bok, 1 June 1926, GAC, box 1.

<sup>142</sup> Antheil to Slonimsky, 3 November 1933, NSC box 129, folder 57.

more than this, I think that it is the great American opera that America has talked and awaited so eagerly for now so many years.”<sup>143</sup>

*Transatlantic* was clearly modeled on *Zeitoper*. Susan Cook notes that its libretto, “devised by Antheil, perhaps at the suggestion of Stuckenschmidt with encouragement by Krenek,”<sup>144</sup> was as topical as anything then playing on the Berlin stage. It tells an allegorical story of a corrupt American election, in which a political boss named Ajax tries to buy the incorruptible “Demopublican” candidate Hector. He loses the election, but Ajax is arrested following a shootout, and Hector and the gang boss’s moll Helena embrace on the Brooklyn Bridge “as the sun rises over New York City and the chorus praises that American institution, hard work.”<sup>145</sup> Kirk finds the work suffused with jazz-age images: “*Transatlantic* weaves many aspects of the era into its plot: a presidential parade, cocktails, revue dancing, cocktails, neon signs (‘Arrow Shirts’), typists, a Salvation Army band, even a soprano who sings an aria in the bathtub.”<sup>146</sup> It was, like *Jonny Spielt Auf* and *Neues vom Tage*, a topical satire in the young *Zeitoper* tradition.

Musically, *Transatlantic* “abounds with jazz idioms and other identifiably American music.”<sup>147</sup> It made liberal use of then-novel jazz rhythms and then-fashionable social dances like the foxtrot and tango, and was scored for an orchestra including saxophones and a banjo. Like *Jonny* and Hindemith’s *Hin und zurück*, *Transatlantic*’s staging was strongly influenced by cinematic techniques and technology. Newspaper headlines were projected on a screen at the rear of the stage, and one scene runs in slow-

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<sup>143</sup> Antheil to Bok, 22 February 1928, GAC, box 1.

<sup>144</sup> Cook, 180.

<sup>145</sup> Cook, 180.

<sup>146</sup> Kirk, 226.

<sup>147</sup> Cook, 181.

motion. The opera's final scene employed an enormous mechanical set to provide 28 different stages in imitation of the quick editing style of German films.

Antheil had great hopes for *Transatlantic*, but the complexity inherent in staging the opera prevented a full production for two years. It finally opened in Frankfurt in May, 1930 to rave reviews. Writing for the European edition of *The Chicago Daily Tribune* and the *Daily News*, Irving Scherke announced that the opera "was one of the most brilliant successes in modern operatic history."<sup>148</sup> Nevertheless, there were problems evident from the start of *Transatlantic*'s opening run. In a review for *Musical America*, Oscar Thomson commented that "If complication is the goal of opera, then *Transatlantic*, the mad farrago by the young American composer, George Antheil, which was mounted at the Frankfort Opera on May 25 with no very hesitant flaunting of the American flag, is opera at its zenith."<sup>149</sup> For all of its innovation and cleverness, notes Cook, *Transatlantic* was simply too difficult for most opera houses to produce.<sup>150</sup>

Despite hopes that *Transatlantic* would be staged by the Metropolitan Opera in New York, it was never again performed during the composer's lifetime.<sup>151</sup> Antheil was acutely aware of its failure. Two months after *Transatlantic*'s opening, he wrote apologetically in response to Bok's apparent dissatisfaction at the opera's satirical criticism of American politics, and its failure to attract any attention in the United States.

Before I say anything else, I wish to say that I will write this ideal American opera..... not because you wish it.....although I would do almost anything in the world for you that my mind and talent are capable of... but because I feel differently about America today. I will present the better

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<sup>148</sup> Irving Scherke, "Antheil Given Ovation After Premier Of Opera 'Transatlantic' In Frankfort," *Chicago Daily Tribune and the Daily News* (European Edition), 26 May 1930, 1. GAC Box 10

<sup>149</sup> Oscar Thomson, "'Transatlantic' Brings Novel Variations on the American Theme," *Musical America*, July 1930, 12. GAC box 10.

<sup>150</sup> Cook, 182.

<sup>151</sup> The Minnesota Opera staged a production of *Transatlantic* in 1998 but 75 years after its premiere, it remains unrecorded.

and more idealistic side of America to Europe, instead of its "worse" side..... soon.<sup>152</sup>

Moreover, Antheil would not be, as he had hoped, the bearer of German musical innovation to the United States or the agent of an American operatic reform.

*Transatlantic* became seen as a European work, by the most European of American composers, rather than as the uniquely *American* opera that Antheil considered it to be. Writing to Slonimsky in 1936, he complained that "my American colleagues always associated [*Transatlantic*] with European attempts on the same line. It is not."<sup>153</sup>

In later years, Antheil would protest that he never got the credit he believed he deserved for creating an operatic revolution. He went to great pains to "put the record straight" when Slonimsky solicited his input for a book in 1936. Antheil wrote "I believe I was the first composer, for instance, to write a modern political opera of any sort, I have never been given any credit for that fact as well as for quite a number of other things."<sup>154</sup> Indeed, pointing out that *Transatlantic* was completed, with a publication contract signed a year before Weill's *Threepenny Opera*, Antheil went so far as to insist that he deserved credit for the political direction of all modern opera. He wanted to make it clear "that *Transatlantic* was begun in 1927 and finished in 1928, which fact I can prove by my publishers contract. This makes it a forerunner of all political operas."<sup>155</sup> None of the American composers then in Europe ever saw the opera in full production, though Antheil did occasionally play a keyboard reduction of excerpts in informal private recitals. In the end, *Transatlantic*'s direct influence on American opera was slight.

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<sup>152</sup> Antheil to Bok, August 1930, GAC, box 1

<sup>153</sup> Antheil to Slonimsky, 3 November 1933, NSC, box 129, folder 57.

<sup>154</sup> Antheil to Slonimsky, 21 July 1936, NSC, box 129, folder 57.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

However, he had become, at the age of 30, the *eminence grise* of the growing community of American composers in Europe. With *Ballet Mécanique*, the *Symphony in Fa* and *Transatlantic*, Antheil had demonstrated that an American composer could succeed in Europe. Younger composers, like Copland and Thomson, sought his counsel, hoping for an entrée to the modernist scene. Antheil had become more of a symbol than an influence. In 1926, a few months after his arrival in Paris, Virgil Thomson wrote to a friend of the importance he placed on Antheil's opinion.

Antheil has been the chief event. For the first time in history, another musician liked my music. For the first time since I left your society, somebody said hello. Somebody recognized what I was all about. Or recognized that I was something worth looking at.<sup>156</sup>

Thomson was grateful for the more established composer's recognition and support. However, as important as Antheil might have been as Europe's American modernist patriarch, within a few years, his stature as a musical innovator had begun to wane.

On his second trip to the continent in 1930, the young Marc Blitzstein, acting on advice from Copland, made an obligatory pilgrimage to Antheil's home at Cagnes. It was not a satisfactory meeting for either composer.

The encounter was unfortunate – miserable for me. Evidently I had counted on him for something; and he failed completely. As a matter of fact, I know that consciously I had been expecting a great deal in the way of a contact, because I had been having such violent reactions of incredulity and worry over various items about and by him in the recent news – incredulity that he could be quoted correctly, worry that he was being. It's all true, and worse, it seems.<sup>157</sup>

Deeply disturbed by the meeting, Blitzstein concluded that the one-time bad boy of modern music was little more than a musical has-been: "There is only a certain amount of

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<sup>156</sup> Virgil Thomson to Briggs Buchanan, May 1926 in *Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson*, Tim Page and Vanessa Weeks Page, eds., New York: Summit Books, 1988. 72.

<sup>157</sup> Blitzstein to Copland, 19 August 1930, Aaron Copland Collection (ACC), Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC, box 246, folder 44.



cleverness in his borrowings from the most recent Krenek, Weill, Stravinsky; in general the spots are glaring, the connecting transitions shabby, almost as loose as the links in a potpourri.”<sup>158</sup> Later that year, Antheil returned to the United States permanently, but a disastrous concert tour of *Ballet Mécanique* irreparably damaged his artistic reputation.

With *Transatlantic* consigned to an oblivion that it probably did not deserve, the operatic renovation project fell to Antheil’s colleagues. Thomson’s first opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, was a highly idiosyncratic collaboration with librettist Gertrude Stein. As much as it is about anything, it focuses on the life of St. Theresa of Avila and has four acts and features many more than three saints. But, Elise K. Kirk notes, the absurd title is appropriate: “There is no real plot, only a series of tableaux that depict imaginary events in the lives of the saints.”<sup>159</sup> The opera was well-received when it opened at the 44<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre in New York in February, 1934, but audiences found that Stein’s nonsense rhymes and the absurdist non-plot made the work inaccessible. Bordman observes that “the piece was obviously not part of any on-going Broadway tradition and patently unlikely to initiate one.”<sup>160</sup> Neither did *Four Saints* initiate an operatic tradition, for it never became a standard part of the operatic repertoire.<sup>161</sup>

Copland composed his first opera, *The Second Hurricane*, for the specific, limited context of a performance by the young students at the New York’s Henry Street Settlement Music School in April, 1937. The opera was conducted by Broadway veteran Lehman Engel, and directed by rising star Orson Welles, but it was not a major

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Kirk, 217.

<sup>160</sup> Bordman, *American Musical Theatre*, 487.

<sup>161</sup> Tawa, 64.

production, and hardly one of Copland's more significant works. Thomson wrote that it "contains delicious verse and a dozen lovely tunes, but it has never traveled far."<sup>162</sup>

Like most of his contemporaries, Blitzstein had studied composition with Boulanger at the American Conservatory, but in other ways, his musical education was far more Germanic. He found living in Europe, particularly in Paris, to be an immensely liberating experience. He felt *part* of something, and went out of his way to absorb the Parisian stimulus. Writing to a family friend shortly after his arrival in 1926, Blitzstein gushed "when I was made unmistakably sure that I was potentially indigenous to Paris, Lucerne, Florence; and that 'chez moi' might stand for all the world, then the attending joy became a precious gold-bag, to be fiercely guarded, miser-fashion. I jealously kept all thoughts of home, friends, family, old tricks and tracks, from it; for the moment I was completely in the new mood. I wanted nothing of America."<sup>163</sup>

However, Blitzstein wanted much of Europe, and his short stay in Paris, from the fall of 1926 until February, 1927 was enormously productive. Enrolling in Boulanger's composition class at the American conservatory, he followed in the path already set by Copland, Thomson and the others.

I have started studying composition with Nadia Boulanger, an incredible Spartan woman; her musicianship is limitless, she is entirely charming, and she likes me. Next week I see Ravel, he won't teach anyone, I know that, but I'm hoping for some valuable criticism. At least three concerts of the very first importance are given here daily; one simply tosses up to decide.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Virgil Thomson, *American Music Since 1910*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 55.

<sup>163</sup> Blitzstein to Berenice Skidelski, 24 October 1926, MBP, reel 1.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

Student and teacher had developed an immediate rapport, and they performed together on at least two occasions that winter. Blitzstein also composed two of a growing cycle of Walt Whitman song settings later collected under the title *Coon Shouts*.

However, as the American Conservatory's 1927 winter session began, Blitzstein surprised most of his colleagues by making an unexpected pilgrimage to Berlin, to study with Arnold Schoenberg. Boulanger was shocked; Schoenberg's serialism was anathema to French neo-classicists. In his biography of Blitzstein, *Mark the Music*, Eric A. Gordon observes that "except for those older musicians too committed to Romanticism to appreciate the new trends, most composers fell into one school or another; no one could be a partisan of both Stravinsky and Schoenberg."<sup>165</sup> The American composer Adolph Weiss had already made a pilgrimage to the master of the Second Viennese School, but Blitzstein was the only American to have studied with both Boulanger and Schoenberg.

Despite the months he spent in Berlin under Schoenberg's instruction, Blitzstein was never won over to serialism, though he retained a grudging respect for the master which, Gordon writes, was at least partly reciprocated.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, Blitzstein returned to Berlin in 1928 to continue his studies with Schoenberg at the Hochschule. Significantly, both of his stays in Berlin coincided with the Novembergruppe's greatest successes and the first experiments in *Zeitoper*. There is no evidence that Blitzstein ever met Weill, Eisler, Hindemith or any of the other radical modernists who would later influence his work. However, Gordon notes that he did attend a concert of piano sonatas by Hans Dammert and Stefan Wolpe, and was quite moved by the latter's work.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 26.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

In the summer of 1929, Blitzstein immersed himself in the musical scene while touring the capitals of the German operatic renaissance with Copland. The tour had at least two additional purposes; Blitzstein was trying to arouse interest in a German production of his one-act opera *Triple-Sec*, and he and Copland were exploring the possibility of starting a romance. Blitzstein described his travels in a postcard to Eva Goldbeck, a writer he had met at an artists' colony the previous summer:

Darmstadt – “Neues vom Tage” not so good – party with Hindemith afterwards. Directors charming to us – they like “Triple-Sec” one more audition which may do the trick. Frankfurt – “Orpheus,” by Gluck. Wiesbaden – “Dreigroschen Oper.” Aaron and I are sampling celestial beer; in other departments, the ground has been looked over, tested, but not yet plumbed.<sup>168</sup>

Blitzstein and Copland would remain close for decades, but they were never romantically involved. Blitzstein wrote to Goldbeck – who was becoming his closest confidante and muse – that “as to Aaron and I: that is fixed, for me.”<sup>169</sup> More importantly, he wrote, both the Darmstadt Opera and Schotts Söhne, one of Germany’s largest music publishers, wanted to see the score for *Triple-Sec*. Blitzstein was guardedly optimistic: “Dr. Böhm, musikdirektor of Darmstadt, received it in silence – but all the others tell me that they are stepping on the gas on its behalf.”<sup>170</sup>

*Triple-Sec* was Blitzstein’s first real success in the musical theatre, though he had composed two earlier, unperformed ballets. Most of Blitzstein’s early compositions, in fact, were concert pieces, most notably the Whitman songs, his 1927 piano sonata and *Percussion Music for the Piano* in 1929. Composed in 1928, *Triple-Sec* was a hybrid ballet-opera that demonstrates his early commitment to “absolute music” and avant-garde

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<sup>168</sup> Blitzstein to Eva Goldbeck, 13 September 1929, MBP, reel 1.

<sup>169</sup> Blitzstein to Goldbeck, 18 September 1929, MBP, reel 1.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

abstraction. The libretto, by Ronald Jeans, was conventional enough for jazz-age audiences: Lord Silverside's impending marriage to Lady Betty is scuttled when a mysterious stranger announces that the lord is already married and she is his wife. However, the opera takes a Dadaist turn into dramaturgical absurdity. According to Gordon, "the assumption of the work, announced by a Hostess in the prologue, is that we are enjoying the drama while eating supper – more to the point, while drinking copious glasses of champagne and getting drunker by the minute."<sup>171</sup> At midpoint in the fifteen-minute opera, individual characters appear in duplicate, then triplicate, until "finally, there are eight butlers fetching water for the fainted lady"<sup>172</sup> while stage lights flash and the set rocks back and forth in an approximation of inebriation.

It was a slight work, but it was Blitzstein's first confirmed stage hit. Over the composer's initial objections, *Triple-Sec* was included in the 1930 revival of the *Garrick Gaieties* revue, directed by Philip Loeb and featuring Imogene Coca as one of the Lady Betties. The production was a success, but back in Europe and with his head in the concert hall rather than on Broadway, Blitzstein wrote to his sister Jo with nothing but contempt for the popular stage and its audience:

As for me – for my real music of which *Triple Sec* is a part, – its success in the *Gaieties* can mean very little. As I read between the lines half the applause comes from an audience who don't know what it's all about, but accept it as a spoof on grand-opera; and half is from the snobs... who are delighted to go slumming a bit and discover a diamond in the rough, so-to-speak. However, who cares?<sup>173</sup>

By the summer of 1930, Blitzstein must have found himself well-beyond the light work he had composed as a 23-year-old student. Indeed, his next work for the stage, the

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<sup>171</sup> Gordon, 38.

<sup>172</sup> Gordon, 38.

<sup>173</sup> Blitzstein to Josephine Blitzstein Davis, 23 June 1930, MBP, reel 2.

“opera-ballet” *Parabola and Circula* for solo baritone and dancers shows the continued development of Blitzstein’s interests *away* from the accessible stage works that Antheil had challenged American composers to write.

Composed in late-1929 to a libretto by George Whitset, *Parabola and Circula* is, Gordon writes, “set in a cubistic ‘World of Forms’ where plants, flowers, and even light have strange shapes.”<sup>174</sup> The title characters – played by a baritone and soprano – live in a state of perfection with their children Rectangula and Intersecta until their world is destroyed by Parabola’s growing doubts. Musically, the work is influenced by French neo-classicism and Blitzstein was not completely satisfied with the result. He was, he wrote, still trying to develop a voice of his own: “The only way I can state it is that, in my compositions, I have as yet no face; the structure is clear and solid, the *métier* becoming what it should be, and the urge to get it out as strong as ever.”<sup>175</sup> *Parabola and Circula* has never been produced in its entirety. By the beginning of 1930, Blitzstein was beginning to work out how to approach his music for the stage and, under the growing influence of Eva Goldbeck, find new sources of inspiration.

Goldbeck joined Blitzstein in February 1930 on a working vacation on Capri, where he planned to complete string quartet and the orchestration of the *Romantic Piece for Orchestra*, which the Philadelphia Orchestra was considering for its 1931 season. In April, in response to a suggestion by the Philadelphia Orchestra’s Alexander Smallens that he enter a competition sponsored by the League of Composers, Blitzstein began work on the ballet *Cain*. Deeply excited by the subject material, Blitzstein worked at a furious pace. With its social message about violence – in the final scene, all the characters bear

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<sup>174</sup> Gordon, 51.

<sup>175</sup> Blitzstein to Skidelski, 9 April 1930, MBP, reel 2.

the mark of Cain – and the use of elements of Piscator’s radical stagecraft,<sup>176</sup> *Cain* was a sharp departure from Blitzstein’s earlier work, and he knew it.

I know I have written the best thing in my career. Yet I have made a failure; no one else will know it, I do. I’m not mature enough to do a Cain; someday I shall be. I lack humility; one has no business to tackle a subject so overwhelmingly magnificent at my age; I get all the richness, and the scope, not the implications. Yet Cain is the work which has given me vision for works to come.<sup>177</sup>

Goldbeck, to whom the ballet is dedicated, appears to have had a profound influence on *Cain*. The following winter, Goldbeck’s former husband Cecil became alarmed at the potential for scandal when Blitzstein’s Capri compositions were published, all dedicated to Eva. The composer assured her in a letter, “I said all the pieces – the Romantic, the quartet, Cain – are yours; good God, *of course* I mean it – they are yours in a way no other person to whom I dedicate a work will ever have.”<sup>178</sup>

Blitzstein’s relationship with Goldbeck was complex. She was probably aware of his homosexuality almost from the moment they met,<sup>179</sup> but she was deeply attracted to him and articulated her devotion to him during their stay on Capri. The composer had never ruled-out the possibility of having relationships with women. On Christmas Eve, 1929, he wrote to Jo that “I believe I should be medically classed a bisexual, since I have had sexual experience with women and liked it.” Moreover, he wrote that he would even be open to the idea of marriage: “If ever the social gesture is demanded of me (and I go so far as to consider marriage for me as a possible social gesture) I can accept it or reject

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<sup>176</sup> The voice of God is heard from a loudspeaker suspended above the bare stage.

<sup>177</sup> Blitzstein to Davis, 23 June 1930, MBP, reel 2.

<sup>178</sup> Blitzstein to Goldbeck, 16 February 1931, MBP, reel 2.

<sup>179</sup> Gordon writes that, when Blitzstein walked through the colony’s doors, Goldbeck shocked the other guests by blurting out “who’s this fairy coming?” (37) In any event, his marriage to Goldbeck notwithstanding, Blitzstein rarely made a secret of his sexuality after about 1929.

it as I chose without any fear of incapacity.”<sup>180</sup> Blitzstein and Goldbeck were, in fact, married in March, 1933 and though their relationship was frequently rocky and probably only intermittently sexual – they normally lived in separate rooms and, on vacation, sometimes in separate but neighbouring cottages – it was deeply intimate.

A freelance writer, editor and translator, Goldbeck worked for MGM studios in Europe for several years, reporting on French and German plays and films that the American studio might want to acquire. Goldbeck was the daughter of German-American journalist and translator Eduard Goldbeck and Lina Abarnabell, a Jewish operetta and light opera singer who performed and recorded throughout Europe and the United States, and whose professional contacts included Franz Lehar and Oscar Straus.<sup>181</sup> She was well-connected with the American leftist-modernist literary community on both sides of the Atlantic. She had grown up with Monroe Wheeler, and her circle included the poet Glenway Westcott, Whitman scholar Clifton Furness and Lewis Mumford. Goldbeck would continue to be a profound influence on Blitzstein’s work, and brought him into intimate contact with the community of intellectuals and artists who would soon coalesce in the cultural front.

Blitzstein was receptive to Goldbeck’s political influence in the early 1930s. Although his work before 1932 was, if anything, aggressively apolitical, and he displayed little interest in politics at all in his correspondence and writing before 1930, he had grown up in a left-wing environment. A banker in Philadelphia before the 1929 crash, Blitzstein’s father nevertheless had distinctly leftist inclinations and had been a supporter

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<sup>180</sup> Blitzstein to Davis, 24 December, 1929, MBP, reel 1.

<sup>181</sup> Gordon writes that Lehar and Straus “had written songs and even entire operettas for her.” (35).



of Eugene V. Debs.<sup>182</sup> Like many small bankers, he was ruined in the Wall Street crash and, in the mid-1930s, turned farther to the left, becoming a supporter of the Popular Front and the Communist Party.<sup>183</sup>

Despite the political influence of his upbringing and his exposure to the new German opera on his European travels, Blitzstein remained unimpressed and uninfluenced by the work of Hindemith, Krenek, Eisler and Weill, and had little time for either *Zeitoper* or *Gebrauchsmusik*. In 1928, he had given a series of lectures in Philadelphia on the “Modern Movement in Music,” in which he dismissed Weill’s music as “drivel” and Krenek’s *Jonny Spielt Auf* as “trash.”<sup>184</sup> Railing against the influence of popular music – particularly jazz – in the opera house and concert hall in *Modern Music* in 1933, he described *Johnny* as “poor theatre, and meandering, decentralized jazz, far from its source and showing it.”<sup>185</sup> Blitzstein had more respect for *Gebrauchsmusik*. The problem, he wrote, was that its German modernist proponents just did it badly:

There is no reason why new “functional” music played in schools, beergardens, over the radio, in the talkies, should not be good music. Yet *Gebrauchsmusik* is apparently doomed. Once the theory was formed, look at the style of music it brought forth! Music which abjectly copied what the mob had *already learned* to like.”<sup>186</sup>

The music of Kurt Weill, he continued, was decadent: “the dissolution of a one-time genuine article, regurgitated upon an innocent public.”<sup>187</sup> This assessment had not changed as late as 1935 when Blitzstein wrote of hearing a private performance of Weill’s work-in-progress *The Road to Promise*,<sup>188</sup> which he called “Weill’s best score,

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<sup>182</sup> Gordon, 98.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>185</sup> Blitzstein, “Popular Music – an Invasion: 1923-1933,” *Modern Music* 10, no. 2 (1933): 100.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Performed in the United States as *The Eternal Road*.

and also his most uneven.”<sup>189</sup> The German, he wrote, was basically a one-note song, capable of only one style, no matter how inappropriate. Blitzstein observed that “using the same general style for the Middle-Western *Mahogonny* (sic) and the Old Testament *Road to Promise* evidently does not bother him.”<sup>190</sup>

After 1930, as Blitzstein’s politics began to veer farther to the left and he and Goldbeck became increasingly involved in the Communist Party and the cultural front, both his opinions on the new German opera and his musical style would gradually change.<sup>191</sup> Indeed, in his next work for the stage, a choral opera entitled *The Condemned*, the composer dramatically abandoned his commitment to “absolute” music. Blitzstein composed the opera in 1932 to his own libretto, and although they are never named, *The Condemned* is an account of the night before Sacco and Vanzetti’s execution. The choice of subject was not accidental. As Denning has observed, the trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti was one of the Popular Front’s foundation myths, inspiring John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A* trilogy and Upton Sinclair’s novel *Boston*.<sup>192</sup>

Goldbeck believed that *The Condemned* was Blitzstein’s “first grand, great” work. Upon hearing it, she wrote, “the drama came to life by itself; a sort of electricity was generated and shot out beyond everything else – beyond the actual music, too.”<sup>193</sup> In *The Condemned*, Blitzstein was able to reconcile his music with his increasingly radical politics. Goldbeck observed, in a letter to her parents, “it satisfied (for the time being) a dormant conflict of music and Communism in Marc.”<sup>194</sup> Featuring no soloists, and with

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<sup>189</sup> Marc Blitzstein, “Theatre-Music in Paris,” *Modern Music* 12, no. 3 (1935): 132-133.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>191</sup> It is not clear whether Blitzstein was ever a card-carrying Communist; in theory, his homosexuality would have barred him from membership.

<sup>192</sup> Denning, 59.

<sup>193</sup> Goldbeck to Davis, 29 September 1932, MBP, reel 2.

<sup>194</sup> Goldbeck to Eduard Goldbeck and Lina Abarnabell, October 11, 1932. Reel 2

each character played by a chorus, *The Condemned* was hardly an example of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, but it was explicitly political, Goldbeck wrote: “Fortunately the opera is not specific or realistic or directly propaganda: the music saves it from that, even if Marc had had other than stylized-universal intentions, which he didn’t.”<sup>195</sup>

Blitzstein played *The Condemned*’s unfinished score for Albert Coates that summer. A Russian-born American conductor with Communist sympathies, Coates had been engaged by the Soviet government to organize a music school, operas and concerts of American music in the Soviet Union. He was interested in *The Condemned* and proposed a performance of the opera, to be directed by Meyerhold, sometime in 1933. Blitzstein was ecstatic.

Coates is boiling with enthusiasm for the opera and is arranging that I be invited by Russia to come and "demonstrate" it. What "invite" means, I managed to find out: Russia will pay my expenses while there, and my trip back... And so my career probably starts officially in Russia.<sup>196</sup>

It did not turn out that way. By the time Blitzstein finished the orchestration, Coates had already terminated his contract with the Soviets. Despite the composer’s efforts to elicit some kind of response from Soviet officials, no one seemed interested. Back in the United States, moreover, Blitzstein found that his colleagues – specifically Copland – were distinctly unimpressed, finding *The Condemned* too static and abstract.<sup>197</sup> It was, in short, replete with the artistic monkey business Antheil criticized in 1930. The opera was never performed, but Blitzstein had found his métier in political theatre. He had only to adopt a more appropriate idiom. He would find it in the new German music.

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Blitzstein to Davis, 3 October 1932, MBP, reel 2.

<sup>197</sup> Gordon, 80.

## CHAPTER 3

*THE CRADLE WILL ROCK*

Blitzstein had begun to moderate his negative opinion of the Germans by the time he hosted “A Concert of Premieres,” a concert-lecture at the Mellon Galleries in Philadelphia, in February, 1934. Speaking to the press before the event, he promised to “introduce *Gebrauchsmusik*” to the American public.<sup>198</sup> Blitzstein was still critical of Weill and Krenek, but his increasing involvement in the cultural front had forced him to take political music more seriously, even if he had yet to master the idiom. By 1934, he was firmly in the Popular Front camp, fully identifying with Communism, whether or not he was a formal member. That year, in fact, Blitzstein and Goldbeck had been deported to France from Belgium as suspected Communists after having attended a Party youth rally. Blitzstein briefly considered filing a formal complaint about the affair, but that, he realized, would have required him to deny being a Communist. He wrote to Goldbeck that this was something he was unwilling to do.

I think the matter will probably be dropped; largely because the point of our not being Communists would have to be played to the extent (and beyond it) used by that Embassy sec'y in Paris. This will be so bad for our future activities that I think it's risky.<sup>199</sup>

Upon his return from Europe, Blitzstein had become serious about becoming directly involved in the Popular Front, and he threw himself into cultural front and explicitly Communist activities. Carol Oja observes that he might have “started life with many

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<sup>198</sup> Gordon, 87.

<sup>199</sup> Blitzstein to Goldbeck, 22 January 1935, MBP reel 3.

musical ideas, but until he encountered the masses, they had little purpose.”<sup>200</sup> That encounter would be decisive. Blitzstein was determined to become a revolutionary composer, though his first steps were not entirely successful.

The previous summer, he had entered a setting of Alfred Hayes’ poem “Into the Streets May First” in the Workers Music League May Day song competition sponsored by *New Masses*. Copland won the competition and although Charles Seeger, the president of the Pierre Degeyter Club, welcomed the arrival of another talented composer on the proletarian music scene, he worried that Blitzstein was not quite attuned to his new audience’s ear:

There is need, however, for songs on current topics... as well as picket, strike, union and other songs. The great trouble is words to set. There is also need for concert songs with words on the class struggle... I think you would be wise to try things for the concert stage until you come back. The mass song, which is to be sung by large crowds not because it is taught to them, but because they have heard it and want to sing it, has some definite limitations that you must know about before trying again.<sup>201</sup>

Blitzstein was undaunted by the failure of his first attempt at mass song, and he immersed himself in New York’s Communist music scene. He joined the Composers’ Collective, becoming the organization’s secretary and a member of the executive committee shortly thereafter. According to Oja, the Collective, whose members included Seeger, Copland and Cowell, sought to “write mass songs, which were directed to the ‘workers’ and ‘people’s’ choruses that were springing up in unions and factories all over New York.”<sup>202</sup> In effect, Blitzstein set out to learn how to create a revolutionary *Gebrauchsmusik*.

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<sup>200</sup> Carol J. Oja, “Marc Blitzstein’s *The Cradle Will Rock* and Mass-Song Style of the 1930s, *Musical Quarterly* 73 (1989): 473.

<sup>201</sup> Charles Seeger to Blitzstein, 18 July 1934, MBP, reel 3.

<sup>202</sup> Oja, 447.

With Hanns Eisler in New York in the winter and spring of 1935, he had the ideal teacher. Eisler had come to the United States on a concert tour to raise money for the families of German political prisoners. As an executive of the Composers' Collective, and one of the few members fluent in German, Blitzstein played a major role in organizing Eisler's March 2, 1935 benefit concert with the Degeyter Club Orchestra. Throughout 1934 and 1935, Goldbeck had interviewed Eisler for the *Brooklyn Eagle*. Gordon notes that "in Hanns Eisler, Blitzstein had at last found the man for whom he had been searching."<sup>203</sup> Like Blitzstein, he had studied with Schoenberg, and his style had evolved from Second Viennese School expressionism to the more direct style of his mass-song cantata *Die Mutter*. Yet, as Gordon points out, "his music remained solid, without pandering."<sup>204</sup> He had succeeded in doing what Blitzstein had been trying to do, without success, in *The Condemned* and "Into the Streets May First."

Eisler's influence would prove decisive. Blitzstein's "Music Manifesto," published in *New Masses* in the summer of 1936, began with a quote from a speech Eisler had given the previous December. In its savage attack on "ivory-tower, wish-fulfillment artists," the manifesto marks Blitzstein's final break with "absolute" music and his embrace of *Gebrauchsmusik* and the radical German modernist aesthetic. He had reconciled his "conflict of music and Communist," and Eisler was the model.

Eisler is more than a composer. Rather, he is a new kind of composer, whose job carries him to the meeting hall, the street, the mill, the prison, the school-room and the dock. Concert, opera-house, theater are still in the picture; but the artist is not only an artist but worker, his responsibility to all workers shows itself in all his work. Eisler is a Marxist. Other composers have been, are Marxists; Eisler is possibly the first instance of the real fusion of Marxist and musician.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Gordon, 101.

<sup>204</sup> Gordon, 101.

<sup>205</sup> Blitzstein, "Music Manifesto," *New Masses*, 23 June 1936, 28.

Blitzstein criticized the “French-court nymphs and gods” and “sleek loveliness” of Stravinsky’s *Apollon Musagète*, Roger Sessions’ *Choral Preludes*, and “platinum-studded operas and opera-halls.” Blitzstein noted the reluctance of composers who had focused their energies on modernist abstraction to change their ways. However, he argued Eisler had provided the example for a *necessary* politicization of music. The German, he wrote, “has presented a method, a scaffolding and framework any world-minded can adapt to his needs; more, it is *the* plan he must, in some way, follow.”<sup>206</sup>

Significantly, Blitzstein did not consider his new-found dedication to political and socially-relevant music to be a repudiation of modernism, but the logical extension of it. Following the “Music Manifesto,” *New Masses* published a three-part series in which Blitzstein made “The Case for Modern Music.” It was a passionate defense of the modern aesthetic. Blitzstein noted that “the term ‘Modern Music’ today conjures up a picture of alien unreferable sounds called ‘discordant,’ with obscure, enigmatic meanings, called ‘meaningless.’”<sup>207</sup> However, he argued that did not make modernism irrelevant: “Modern music has often been the vehicle for trivial, stupid, vicious statements; but we don’t disdain the radio as a medium because of somebody’s toothpaste.”<sup>208</sup>

Blitzstein argued that the first generation of modernist composers “had been pioneers, tracking down something unknown, getting tools in order.” However, that stage of modernism had come to an end. The new modern composers – like himself – “were already answering a felt need” to meet the demands of the new audience that had emerged from “the rot and decay of Capitalism,” and the First World War: “A great new public is born, it storms the gates. It wants culture, it asks for art. A culture, an art that

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Blitzstein, “The Case for Modern Music,” *New Masses*, 14 July 1936, 27.

<sup>208</sup> Blitzstein, “The Case for Modern Music: III – Technique and Temper,” *New Masses*, 28 July 1936, 28.

will bring it to a deeper knowledge of itself and of reality, that will show it a possible new reality.”<sup>209</sup> There was no longer a *need* for abstract experimentation, though Blitzstein noted that experiments would continue by “new-style academicians.” However, they had been left behind by a new generation of modernist composers who had learned the lessons of their elders and internalized the experiments of the previous generation. He observed that “there was now something more important than means to worry over; there was audience, and communication; not yet content.”<sup>210</sup>

Blitzstein noted the importance of *Gebrauchsmusik* to the new generation of composers, but argued that it was one thing to want to speak directly to an audience with functional music and quite another to have something to say. However, “the *Gebrauchsmusik* movement brought forth men who had political education, who saw the possibilities. Brecht, the German poet, was chief among them.”<sup>211</sup> Combined with powerful, revolutionary text, like Eisler’s *Die Mutter*, modern music was more relevant than ever:

This is the stage at which composers at last feel themselves joined to the proletarian movement, to the struggle of laboring classes everywhere for liberation, self-realization. The composer is now willing, eager, to trade in his sanctified post as Vestal Virgin before the altar of Immutable and Undefilable Art, for the post of an honest workman among workmen, who has a job to do, a job which wonderfully gives other people joy. His music is aimed at the masses; he knows what he wants to say to them.<sup>212</sup>

Blitzstein was doubtless expressing his own aspirations in the article. *He* knew what his job was, and he was “as aware as anybody that the new music of the masses is not going

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<sup>209</sup> Blitzstein, “The Case for Modern Music: II – Second Generation,” *New Masses*, 21 July 1936, 28.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*



to be the music of Schönberg or Stravinsky or Hindemith.”<sup>213</sup> Rather, Blitzstein set out to create a new modern music that would speak directly to his new audience.

Having already composed five pieces for the stage, including three short operas, it is perhaps not surprising that he chose the theatre as the medium to reach that audience. Indeed, Denning observes that “the search for a new form of musical theatre was at the heart of Blitzstein’s work.”<sup>214</sup> However, his previous stage works plainly lacked the directness he believed was necessary for the new, revolutionary modernism; the texts had simply been too obscure. This had been a function of his musical absolutism, and Gordon notes that, even in the explicitly political *The Condemned*, Blitzstein chose to be as unrealistic – and indirect – as possible. For him, Gordon writes, “form was all: The listener simply would have to dig in deep to understand and appreciate the message.”<sup>215</sup> In his next stage work, *The Cradle Will Rock*, his audience would not have to dig at all.

Blitzstein was probably far more familiar with the work and theories of Bertolt Brecht than any of his contemporaries. He undoubtedly encountered his work during his visits to Berlin in the 1920s, on his tour of German opera capitals with Copland and through his musical role model Eisler in New York. Goldbeck had produced a number of translations of Brecht’s speeches, articles and poems in 1934 and 1935, negotiating, unsuccessfully, for the exclusive rights to translate the writer’s work in the United States. She was probably the closest thing to a Brecht expert in the New York cultural front and, at the end of 1935, wrote “Principles of ‘Educational’ Theater,” marking “the first time a

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Denning, 288.

<sup>215</sup> Gordon, 80.

left-wing readership in the United States had been exposed to Brecht's theories."<sup>216</sup>

Blitzstein was a particularly receptive member of that audience.

Goldbeck wrote that both Eisler and Brecht were fundamentally teachers and asked "what can we learn from them?"<sup>217</sup> As it turned out, she suggested, her readers – including her husband – could learn quite a lot. Brecht's new dramaturgy, Goldbeck wrote, was a sharp departure from the "entertainment" theatre of European tradition. Noting that Weill's *Threepenny Opera* was the first production of the epic theatre, Goldbeck explained that the form leads inevitably to a kind of engaged musical theatre, in which all of the arts – drama, literature and music – are put to the service of political education. Indeed, the epic theatre doesn't merely make use of all these arts, "but it combines various forms of production that we have been accustomed to keep separate (we do not even refer to opera as 'the theater')."<sup>218</sup>

Ultimately, according to Goldbeck, the revolutionary art form devised by Brecht was a completely integrated musical theatre in which neither the music nor the drama is subservient to the other – their relative importance changes to meet the demand of the production. She wrote, "to use Eisler's simile, a musical-dramatic study play is like a piece of counterpoint, in which separate melodies make individual tunes, but harmonize and balance one another so they form a larger, better composition." At the end of the day, she concluded "the one thing educational art must always be is a call to action."<sup>219</sup>

It was a call that Blitzstein heard. At a party he and Goldbeck hosted in their Greenwich Village flats for Brecht and the community around *New Masses* and the

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<sup>216</sup> Gordon, 112.

<sup>217</sup> Goldbeck, "Principles of 'Educational' Theater," *New Masses*, 31 December, 1935, 27.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

Composers Collective on December 17, 1935, Blitzstein played a new song on which he had been working. "Nickel Under the Foot" was the soliloquy of a destitute woman forced into prostitution. Standing at a street corner, she feels what she thinks is a nickel under her foot, and sings of her disillusionment:

Maybe you wonder what it is  
 Makes people good or bad;  
 Why some guy, an ace without a doubt,  
 Turns out to be a bastard,  
 And the other way about.  
 I'll tell you what I feel:  
 It's just the nickel under the heel....

Oh, you can live like Hearts-and-Flowers,  
 And every day is a wonderland tour.  
 Oh you can dream and scheme  
 And happily put and take, take and put....  
 But first be sure  
 The nickel's under your foot.

The song echoes the pessimism of the *Threepenny Opera*.<sup>220</sup> Dreams and happiness are for those who can afford them, not for a destitute woman selling herself on a street corner:

Go stand on someone's neck while you're takin;  
 Cut into someone's throat as you put –  
 For every dream and scheme's  
 Depending on whether, all through the storm,  
 You've kept it warm....  
 The nickel under your foot.

And if you're sweet, then you'll grow rotten;  
 Your pretty heart covered with soot.  
 And if for once you're gay,  
 And devil-may-careless, and oh, so hot....  
 I know you've got  
 That nickel under your foot.<sup>221</sup>

<sup>220</sup> In the "Second Threepenny Finale," the chorus sings "mankind is kept alive by bestial acts."

<sup>221</sup> Marc Blitzstein, *The Cradle Will Rock: A Play in Music*, (New York: Random House, 1938), 97-98.

The music was abrasive and subtly chromatic, but it was entirely tonal and Blitzstein's lyrics, written in colloquial American English, were clear and expressive. Brecht was impressed and, the story goes, he advised Blitzstein to use the song as a starting point for "a piece about all kinds of prostitution – the press, the church, the courts, the arts, the whole system."<sup>222</sup> Blitzstein must have felt a considerable debt to the German dramatist, for he dedicated the libretto of *The Cradle Will Rock* "to Bert Brecht."

What Blitzstein really needed in 1936 was a job, and he was ready to prostitute himself. He earned some income as an occasional lecturer at the New School and New York's Downtown Music School but, like many of his contemporaries, the composer turned to the Works Progress Administration projects with varying levels of success. As early as the fall of 1935, he and Goldbeck had been in contact with the WPA's Federal Writers Project although, since they were not on relief, they were not eligible for any of the FWP projects then available.<sup>223</sup> The Federal Music Project briefly offered some remuneration, but it was not the most congenial environment for someone of Blitzstein's views and aesthetic inclinations.<sup>224</sup> Nevertheless, the FMP initially provided a \$10 honorarium to participants in its New York-based Composers' Forum-Laboratory. Bindas observes that the "New York City forums met with such outstanding success that the laboratory expanded its activities the following year."<sup>225</sup> The Forum-Laboratory's goal was to break down the barrier between the composer and his public. Both the project's goals and the honorarium doubtless interested Blitzstein. But in 1936, New York

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<sup>222</sup> Quoted in Denning, 290. While there are few references to this event in Blitzstein's papers, the story has been repeated in virtually every account of the creation of *The Cradle Will Rock*.

<sup>223</sup> Henry G. Alsberg to Mary Lescaze, 13 October 1935, MBP, reel 3.

<sup>224</sup> FMP Director Nikolai Sokoloff showed a marked preference for music by established European composers, and as Bindas notes, "The FMP tried from the start to distance itself from its more radical sister projects." Bindas, 11.

<sup>225</sup> Bindas, 65.

University, the source of the funding, withdrew its subsidy, pleading “unforeseen financial difficulties.”<sup>226</sup>

In the spring of 1936, Seeger, now a technical advisor to the Special Skills Division of the Resettlement Administration, offered Blitzstein an appointment in the Administration’s music office at an annual salary of \$1800.<sup>227</sup> Blitzstein never replied. Goldbeck, who had long suffered from an eating disorder,<sup>228</sup> had checked herself into a Boston psychiatric hospital for treatment and died suddenly on May 26. Blitzstein was crushed. Following a short telegram to Abarnabell, he seems to have completely withdrawn from the world. For ten weeks, he rarely appeared in public, did not perform, and seems to have corresponded with no one.<sup>229</sup>

During that time, however, he took up Brecht’s challenge to build a play around “Nickel Under the Foot.” In two months, he began and completed the libretto and music for *The Cradle Will Rock*. In many respects, it was a culmination of the Brechtian epic theatre as Goldbeck had explained it in *New Masses*. Characters are presented as caricatures, object lessons for study rather than identification. The story tells of the organization of a union in “Steeltown U.S.A.,” ending in the triumph of organized labour over monopolistic capitalism. In the first scene, The Moll is arrested for prostitution and hauled into nightcourt on the evening of a big union drive. Steeltown’s leading citizens, the anti-union Liberty Committee, are there too, having been nabbed by an over-zealous policeman. In a series of flashbacks, Harry Druggist, who has fallen on hard times since

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<sup>226</sup> Ashley Pettis to Blitzstein, 12 January 1936, MBP, reel 3.

<sup>227</sup> Seeger to Blitzstein, 21 April 1936, MBP, reel 3.

<sup>228</sup> It was probably anorexia nervosa. Blitzstein’s letters to Goldbeck contain frequent pleas that she eat.

<sup>229</sup> Usually a prolific correspondent, Blitzstein seems to have been completely silent from May 26 until the middle of August 1936. The first letter in his collected papers following Goldbeck’s death is to Clara Mayer, assistant director of the New School for Social Research on August 10, 1936.

his son was killed in anti-union violence, shows how all the Committee members – Editor Daily, Dr. Specialist, Reverend Salvation, Professor Scoot – are the real prostitutes to the capitalist boss Mr. Mister:

They won't buy our milkwhite bodies,  
So we kinda sell out in some other way –  
To Mr. Mister.<sup>230</sup>

The music and text are fully integrated. There are identifiable songs but no set-pieces, and no distinction between recitatives and arias; the characters simply sing the vast majority of the dialogue in solos, duets and choruses. Copland noted that “one new innovation peculiar to Blitzstein was introduced: the musical sections, instead of being formally set with definite beginnings and endings, seemed to start and finish casually, so that one was rarely conscious of where the music began and the dialogue left off, or vice versa.”<sup>231</sup> Very little of the dialogue is actually spoken, and most of what is, is accompanied by music and, often enough, chanted. *Cradle* is very much a song-driven political drama. Blitzstein wrote that he “could say in a song what would ordinarily take pages of dialogue; and that you could expand and deepen, too, by means of music.” For a politically-engaged artist like himself, “music in the theatre is a powerful, almost immorally potent weapon.”<sup>232</sup>

However, *Cradle* was, and remains, difficult to define. Blitzstein found that, whatever his intentions and preconceptions, the work – whether a play, a musical or an opera – defied definition. He might have had a clear idea of what he was creating before he created it, but *The Cradle Will Rock*, he later wrote, took on a life of its own.

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<sup>230</sup> Blitzstein, *The Cradle Will Rock*, 41.

<sup>231</sup> Copland, *Our New Music*, 197.

<sup>232</sup> Blitzstein, “On Writing Music For the Theatre,” *Modern Music* 15, no. 2 (1938): 85.

When I started to write the *Cradle* I had a whole a beautiful theory lined up about it. Music was to be used for those sections which were predominantly lyrical, satirical, and dramatic. My theories got kicked headlong as soon as I started to write; it became clear to me that the theatre is so elusive an animal that each situation demands its own solution.<sup>233</sup>

Both Thomson and Copland called *Cradle* an opera at various times, the latter showing how elusive the definition really was when he wrote in 1941 that “the whole is something of a cross between social drama, musical revue and opera.”<sup>234</sup> Blitzstein subtitled the published libretto “a play in music,” and in the foreword, Archibald MacLeish called it an “operetta.”<sup>235</sup> Welles, the work’s first director, struggled for a definition in the preface, ultimately deciding that, in its seamless integration of music and drama, *Cradle* was a new art form altogether.

The arts of Music and the Play have had efficient business relationships in the past, an occasional partnership and a few happy marriages. Here, finally, is their first off-spring. It is a love-child, and besides being legitimate, it looks like both its parents, and it is called a “music drama.”<sup>236</sup>

Ultimately, Thomson would praise *Cradle* as a “political tract *singspiel*,”<sup>237</sup> Denning agrees, suggesting that it can be characterized as a “Brechtian *Songspiel*”<sup>238</sup> in the tradition of *Mahagonny* and the *Threepenny Opera*. Considering Blitzstein’s avowedly Brechtian inclinations, this description is probably the most accurate.

Blitzstein’s debt to *Zeitkunst* was unmistakable. *Cradle* featured a contemporary setting, snappy colloquial dialogue, a cast of proletarian heroes, prostitutes, a rogues gallery of capitalist lowlifes, and a score that owed as much to Tin-Pan Alley and popular

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<sup>233</sup> Blitzstein, “On Writing Music For the Theatre,” 85.

<sup>234</sup> Copland, *Our New Music*, 197.

<sup>235</sup> Archibald MacLeish, foreword to Blitzstein, *The Cradle Will Rock*, 8.

<sup>236</sup> Orson Welles, preface to Blitzstein, *The Cradle Will Rock*, 14.

<sup>237</sup> Virgil Thomson, *American Music Since 1910*, 63.

<sup>238</sup> Denning, 289.

song as avant-garde modernism. Copland wrote “the subject matter was entirely contemporaneous, the solos and concerted numbers were in the manner of popular songs rather than operatic arias and choruses, and the spoken dialogue and music were more evenly balanced.”<sup>239</sup> Indeed, *Cradle* resembled nothing so much as the *Threepenny Opera*.<sup>240</sup> Copland wrote, “Blitzstein was clearly influenced by the examples of Kurt Weill and Hanns Eisler. The *Dreigroschen Oper* of Weill had set the model: spoken dialogue interspersed with recitative, interspersed with more formal numbers such as solos, trios, and choruses.”<sup>241</sup> Where Weill had Jenny and Macheath, Blitzstein created The Moll and Mr. Mister; instead of a mythical London slum, the setting is a mythical, contemporary American industrial town.

By 1936, in fact, Blitzstein had come completely about on Weill’s music. As recently as 1933, he had dismissed the German’s work as “decadent,” but by the end of 1936, reviewing Weill’s *Johnny Johnson* in *Modern Music*, Blitzstein was downright complimentary. His about-face was an indication of how much of a debt *Cradle* owed to German antecedents. He began the review with an admission: “I have written some harsh things about Kurt Weill and his music. I wish now to write a few good things. He hasn’t changed, I have.”<sup>242</sup> Blitzstein now praised what he had once dismissed as corny and trite. Weill’s music was still corny, but the German *used* hackneyed clichés to great effect. Blitzstein noted that “he has a great faith in the old-fashioned,” but “he can crack open, make plastic, even re-form a mold which has hardened in the memory for other

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<sup>239</sup> Copland, *Our New Music*, 196-197.

<sup>240</sup> Blitzstein wrote the English adaptation of the *Threepenny Opera* for its Broadway opening in 1952. The words Bobby Darrin sings in his hit *The Ballad of Mack the Knife* are Blitzstein’s.

<sup>241</sup> Copland, *Our New Music*, 198.

<sup>242</sup> Blitzstein, “Weill Scores for Johnny Johnson,” *Modern Music* 12, no. 2 (1936): 44.



composers.”<sup>243</sup> This was Weill’s genius, Blitzstein wrote, his triteness was not a bad thing, as he had once thought:

Weill’s utter “corniness” is in a way terribly sophisticated; he writes a piece which is the last word in style of that kind. As to its taste, it has a confounding sureness which outlasts transient dicta concerning bad taste and lack of it.<sup>244</sup>

Perhaps reflecting on his own recent composition, which had yet to be performed, Blitzstein mused that, with *Johnny Johnson*, Weill had “practically added a new form to the musical theatre.”<sup>245</sup> He noted that, while it was certainly operatic, *Johnson* also owed a great deal to the Broadway stage and film. It was a model that Blitzstein hoped the American musical stage would follow: “Certainly what it has to offer in the way of new musical form is needed in the New York theatre as few things are needed in it.”<sup>246</sup>

Blitzstein’s own version of this new form was ready for the stage. However, few production companies were ready for something as incendiary as *Cradle*. By the fall of 1936, the Actors’ Repertory Company, which had recently staged Irwin Shaw’s *Bury the Dead*, committed itself to a production, but by the end of the year, notes Gordon, “the company unaccountably got frightened of the material it had originally found so exciting and they handed it back.”<sup>247</sup> Blitzstein himself attributed the turnaround to fear, and considering the provocative nature of the play – he had, after all meant *Cradle* as a provocation – he was prepared to wait for the right producer and director to come along.

The Actors' Repertory Company, after months of work with me, has finally got frightened, and will not do the "Cradle Will Rock." Three other offers have appeared, almost simultaneously, no one really ideal – so I shall be cagey and hold my horse.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Gordon, 134.

<sup>248</sup> Blitzstein to Abarnabell, 23 December, 1936, MBP, reel 3.

As it turned out, the right director had already seen a run-through of *Cradle* at the Actors' Repertory Company's studio that fall. Welles, then 21 and the *Wunderkind* of the New York stage, was supposed to have directed the company's production before the deal fell through. "Apparently, it was love at first sight," recalled John Houseman in his memoirs: "Marc was entranced by Orson's brilliance and power; Orson was excited by the challenge of this, his first contact with musical theatre."<sup>249</sup> Having moved to Federal Theatre Project 891 that winter, however, Welles and his producer Houseman were free to mount their own production.<sup>250</sup> Blitzstein welcomed their enthusiasm but, having been disappointed by the Actors' Repertory Company, and expecting the worst from the government, he remained guarded. WPA funding was far from assured.

I'm not certain yet when I'm to go to Washington to play the *Cradle* for Hopkins -- in a couple of days, I think. Orson and Jack are optimistic, I am pessimistic. Orson slipped the word to me that Jack was so sold on the work he was secretly seeking some outside backing for an independent production, in case the WPA falls through. I sit tight, believe in nothing.<sup>251</sup>

Indeed, Houseman recalled that "There was some feeling, later, in New York and Washington that [FTP director Hallie Flanagan] had been irresponsible in allowing so controversial a piece to be produced at such a precarious time."<sup>252</sup> Nevertheless, Federal Theatre approved the production and Project 891 began preparations for a May Day, 1937 opening night.

The cast was a mixture of professionals and neophytes; only Olive Stanton, who played the Moll, was actually on relief, and Welles tapped cultural front theatre veteran Will Geer to play Mr. Mister and John Adair for the part of Harry Druggist. Lehman

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<sup>249</sup> John Houseman, *Run-Through: A Memoir*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 246.

<sup>250</sup> Houseman's 1985 revival of *Cradle* is available on CD with. See Marc Blitzstein, *The Cradle Will Rock*, 1985 Cast Recording, Jay CDJAY2 1300, 2 CD.

<sup>251</sup> Blitzstein to Davis, 3 March 1937, MBP, reel 3.

<sup>252</sup> Houseman, 247.

Engel was hired to direct the pit orchestra. Thomson, who had been attending rehearsals at the Maxine Elliott Theatre, wrote in the May-June 1937 issue of *Modern Music* that Blitzstein's libretto was "dramatically effective and verbally light, the musical declamation is the season's best by far, and the orchestral accompaniment is of a rare finesse." Thomson praised the composer's "*sens du théâtre*," noting that "Blitzstein has profited by a sincere admiration for Weill's *Mahagonny*." Of the show itself, Thomson wrote, "I predict a genuine success. The opera has passion and elegance."<sup>253</sup>

The production missed its May 1 opening night largely due to problems with Welles's elaborate set design. However, with the WPA threatening cuts to Federal Theatre's funding, the future of *Cradle*, and every other production scheduled for that spring and summer, was in doubt. On May 27, the New York Federal Theatre workers, including the *Cradle* cast, walked off the job in protest; Howard da Silva, playing his character Harry Foreman, handed out leaflets and worked the crowd with his *schtick*.<sup>254</sup>

Well, I'm creepin along in the dark;  
My eyes is crafty, my pockets is bulging!  
I'm loaded, armed to the teeth – with leaflets.  
And am I quick on the draw!  
I come up to you... very slowly ... very snaky;  
And with one fell gesture –  
I tuck a leaflet in your hand.  
And then, one, two, three –  
There's a riot. You're the riot.  
I incited you... I'm terrific, I am!<sup>255</sup>

*Cradle* was finally scheduled to open in preview on June 16 at the Maxine Elliott Theatre, with 18,000 tickets already sold. However, on June 10, Washington announced a 30 percent cut to Federal Theatre staff, and postponed all pending openings until July 1.

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<sup>253</sup> Virgil Thomson, "High-Brows Wow Local Public," *Modern Music* 14, no. 4 (1937): 237.

<sup>254</sup> Gordon, 139.

<sup>255</sup> Blitzstein, *The Cradle Will Rock*, 106.

The cuts were across the board, but in the spring of 1937, with “Little Steel” battling the CIO’s union drive, apparently with the government’s support, some observers saw them as a direct attack on *Cradle*.<sup>256</sup> The *Daily Worker* reported that “rumors were heard that the ‘no production rule’ was directed especially at the Blitzstein show, which tells, in terms of music and satiric verse, the conflict between a steel baron and workers.”<sup>257</sup> Whether or not the injunction on openings was directed at *Cradle*, it only succeeded in making the opening night of Blitzstein’s “play in music” the stuff of Broadway legend.

On June 16, armed guards met the composer, orchestra, cast and crew of *The Cradle Will Rock* at the locked doors of the Maxine Elliott Theatre to prevent them from absconding with Federal Theatre property – sets, costumes and props. By 8:30 pm, six hundred people had gathered outside the theatre. Houseman’s secretary frantically called around New York, looking for an alternate venue and alerting the media; Welles “made a sidewalk speech urging patience, after which Will Geer, star of the show, sang two of its numbers.”<sup>258</sup> Houseman finally booked the Venice Theatre, 20 blocks uptown at 59<sup>th</sup> street and 7<sup>th</sup> avenue, and the cast led a growing crowd on an impromptu parade to the new venue, only to be informed by Actors Equity that their contracts with Federal Theatre prohibited them from appearing on the new stage.<sup>259</sup> To make matters worse, Local 802 of the AFL-affiliated Musicians’ Union forbade any of its members – the whole orchestra – from participating in the rogue production.

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<sup>256</sup> Although U.S. Steel (“Big Steel”) bowed to government pressure and recognized the steelworkers’ union in March, 1937, Washington appeared to apply no such pressure to the smaller steel companies (“Little Steel”), which continued to employ violent and repressive tactics against the CIO’s union drive. On May 30, 1937, ten strikers were killed by police outside the Republic Steel plant in Chicago.

<sup>257</sup> Charles E. Dexter, “New Rule Stops Production of WPA Shows and Musicals,” *Daily Worker*, 17 June 1937, 7.

<sup>258</sup> “Steel Strike Opera is Put Off by WPA,” *New York Times*, 17 June 1937, 1.

<sup>259</sup> As it turned out, the Actors’ Equity position on this matter was mistaken.

Yet the show went on. The Venice Theatre was the weekend home to an Italian nationalist pageant, and a Fascist flag draped a box. The *New York Times* reported: “As the orchestra filed into the orchestra, someone withdrew the flag amid prolonged cheers.”<sup>260</sup> Blitzstein appeared alone at a piano on the bare stage, to introduce the scenes and, if necessary, to play and sing all the parts to his own solo accompaniment. Although they had been banned from the stage, most of the cast sat with the audience. Following a brief introduction by Welles, Blitzstein began playing the opening number – the Moll’s song – and started to sing. Houseman later recalled “it was a few seconds before we realized that to Marc’s strained tenor another voice – a faint, wavering soprano – had been added.” He sang a few lines...

Then, hearing the words taken out of his mouth, Marc paused, and at that moment the spotlight moved off the stage, past the proscenium arch into the house, and came to rest on the lower left box where a thin girl in a green dress with dyed red hair was standing, glassy eyed, stiff with fear, only half audible at first in the huge theatre but gathering strength with every note.<sup>261</sup>

Stanton had taken her cue. Soon, most of the rest of the cast, joined in with the theatre’s only spotlight seeking them out for their entrances. Union rules had kept them off the stage, but they did not prevent them from performing from the audience. By all accounts, the performance was a resounding success. According to the *New York Times* report, “Welles made another speech saying the performance was ‘not a political protest, but an artistic one.’”<sup>262</sup> Archibald MacLeish, who had marched with the procession from the Maxine Elliott and had sat in the audience, “informed the people that they had just shared

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<sup>260</sup> “Steel Strike Opera is Put Off by WPA,” 4.

<sup>261</sup> Houseman, 268.

<sup>262</sup> “Steel Strike Opera is Put Off by WPA,” 4.

in the creation of a historic event, which once and for all had broken down the creaky barrier between audience and stage.”<sup>263</sup>

The following day, Houseman and Welles tried to get assurances from Hallie Flanagan that they would be able to continue the show, with WPA support at the Maxine Elliott Theatre. “They refused as we knew they would,” recalled Houseman. “That left us free to take the next steps.”<sup>264</sup> The show would continue at the Venice Theatre for two weeks,<sup>265</sup> with standing-room-only audiences and with backing from Theatre Guild president Helen Deutsch. The box office was probably helped when, during its second week, the president of Republic Steel vowed that Little Steel would never sign a contract with the CIO. As before, “Mr. Blitzstein with a piano substituted for a twenty-three piece orchestra and the actors, minus make-up or costumes, which belonged to the WPA, sang their parts from seats in the audience.”<sup>266</sup>

By the beginning of July, Federal Theatre was inclined to just wash its hands of the whole *Cradle* affair: “the government has decided to have nothing more to do with it,” noted the *Times*. The newspaper noted that “no concerted fight on the WPA’s abandonment of the show will be made, according to John Houseman, who, with Orson Welles, heads Project 891, the Federal Theatre Project unit which first assembled the production.”<sup>267</sup> Ironically, however, Federal Theatre would regret the decision. The following February, a reader for the project reported that *Cradle* was “easily one of the most powerful pieces of propaganda which has come to the American stage. Federal

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<sup>263</sup> Gordon, 144.

<sup>264</sup> Houseman, 275.

<sup>265</sup> The cast were granted only fourteen days leave from their WPA jobs.

<sup>266</sup> “WPA Opera Put On as Private Show,” *New York Times*, 19 June 1937, 20.

<sup>267</sup> “WPA Permanently Abandons *The Cradle Will Rock* – George M. Cohan as President of the U.S.A.,” *New York Times*, 7 July 1937, 26.

Theatre can scarcely afford to ignore it.”<sup>268</sup> A colleague agreed, calling it “one of the few exciting experiences in the theatre.”<sup>269</sup>

Nevertheless, with the WPA passing on the play, Houseman, Welles and Blitzstein, began planning for a fully commercial production of *Cradle*, after its initial run at the Venice. The show toured steel towns in Pennsylvania and Ohio in July and August while Welles and Houseman organized their commercial repertory company at the newly-established Mercury Theatre. Throughout the following year, radical theatre companies, many affiliated with CIO unions, staged amateur performances all over the United States.<sup>270</sup>

When *Cradle* reopened on Broadway in the fall of 1937, it continued to play to its original Popular Front audience, including cultural front fixtures like dramatist Elmer Rice, who saw the show in February, 1938.<sup>271</sup> Tickets were available at reduced rates for WPA employees and patrons on relief. On the other hand, the *Cradle*’s notoriety and exposure in the press had attracted attention in unexpected places. Rev. James Harry Price, Rector of the Church of Saint James the Less in upscale Scarsdale, also saw the show in February, 1938. He wrote to Blitzstein: “No American play has impressed me so much or stirred me more deeply.”<sup>272</sup> After seeing the *Cradle* in January, Helen Kauffman,

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<sup>268</sup> J. Edward Silver, Federal Theatre Project playreader report, 14 February 1938, Federal Theatre Project Collection (FTP), Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC, container 171.

<sup>269</sup> Nettie King, Federal Theatre Project playreader report, 28 February 1938, FTP, container 171.

<sup>270</sup> Denning, 287.

<sup>271</sup> The Venice Theatre performance had been planned as a benefit for the Downtown Music School, an institution with close ties to the cultural front. Many of Rice’s plays, like *We*, *The People*, *Between Two Worlds* and *Street Scene* were classics of the cultural front. *Street Scene* would later be adapted as an opera by Kurt Weill.

<sup>272</sup> James Harry Price to Blitzstein, February 1938, MBP, reel 19.

from New York's fashionable Upper West Side, wrote a fan letter praising Blitzstein as a "brilliant playwright-composer."<sup>273</sup>

Although *Cradle* had been a fixture on newspaper front pages and news sections throughout its initial run at the Venice, apart from a rehearsal preview by Virgil Thomson in the spring of 1937, it had not yet been reviewed. The reviewers finally arrived on December 5 when the Mercury Theatre opened an "oratorio" version of *Cradle* – there were still no sets, costumes or orchestra, but the cast was seated on chairs on the stage – and the reviews were virtually all raves. Thomson captured the excitement in a piece that appeared belatedly in the journal *Modern Music*:

Come over and hear Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*. Just imagine people, high-brow people and plain people, paying money, real money, to hear an opera with no scenery, no costumes, no orchestra, no conductor, and no trained singers. Do come over. The audience alone is worth the trip.<sup>274</sup>

Praising Blitzstein's "versatility" and "gusto," *New York Times* theatre critic Brooks

Atkinson raved that *Cradle* was "the best thing militant labour has put into a theatre yet."

He continued:

Although Mr. Blitzstein's story of big industry corruption and labor union gallantry is an old one in the working-class theatre, he has transmuted it into a remarkably stirring marching song by the bitterness of his satire, the savagery of his music and the ingenuity of his craftsmanship. At last the comrades of the insurgent theatre can feel sure that they have a fully awakened artist on their side.<sup>275</sup>

Other reviews were equally positive; even Walter Winchell, never a friend of organized labour, praised the show on NBC's Blue Network.<sup>276</sup> *Cradle* was a hit. In 1938, in the full flush of the Mercury production, Random House published the libretto, with music to six

<sup>273</sup> Helen L. Kaufmann to Blitzstein, 3 January 1938, MBP, reel 19.

<sup>274</sup> Virgil Thomson, "In the Theatre," *Modern Music* 15, no. 2 (1938): 112.

<sup>275</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "Marc Blitzstein's 'The Cradle Will Rock' Officially Opens at the Mercury Theatre," *New York Times*, 6 December, 1937, 19.

<sup>276</sup> Gordon, 163.



of the show's songs. In April, Musicraft Records released a seven record original cast recording, priced at \$10.50.<sup>277</sup> Although the recording of *Oklahoma!* in 1943 has often been cited as the first of its genre, Denning notes that *Cradle's* "was the first full-length Broadway cast album."<sup>278</sup> A near-complete cast recording of a Broadway musical was unheard-of in 1938, but it was by then a common practice to release full-length recordings of operas. The unique honour afforded to *Cradle* reflects the contemporary perception that, if not strictly an opera in the sense of *Madame Butterfly*, it was certainly an *operatic* work.

*Cradle* continued to play at the Windsor Theatre on Broadway through the fall of 1937 and into the spring of 1938. Kurt Weill, now living in New York, and composing for the Broadway stage, evidently saw a performance of the show. Gordon notes that the German composer observed the obvious similarities to his own work. According to Gordon, "he began parading around town, asking everyone he met, 'Have you seen my new opera?'"<sup>279</sup> Also in one of the audiences that spring was a young Harvard music student sampling the bright lights and excitement of the "Great White Way." His name was Leonard Bernstein.

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<sup>277</sup> This recording is now available on CD as Marc Blitzstein, *Musical Theatre Premieres*, Pearl GEMS 0009, 2 CD.

<sup>278</sup> Denning, 286.

<sup>279</sup> Gordon, 166.

## CHAPTER 4

*WEST SIDE STORY*

“The development of opera in Europe, which had a sudden upsurge after the war, has been stagnant for many years,” Kurt Weill wrote to his American musical colleagues in 1937. A recent immigrant both to the United States and to Broadway, the German composer saw great potential for a renewal of the opera in his adopted country, but not “in the narrow sense that was prevalent in the nineteenth century. If we substitute the term ‘music theatre,’ the possibilities for development here, in a country not burdened with an opera tradition, become clearer.”<sup>280</sup> Indeed, Weill wrote, “it may be that a music theatre will rise out of Broadway.”<sup>281</sup>

Broadway would have to wait. The Second World War had a profound impact on American music both on the stage and in the concert hall. After 1941, the modernist composers who had swelled the cultural front in the 1930s, seeking to apply the radical aesthetics of *Gebrauchsmusik* and *Zeitstücke*, mobilized to serve the nation in any way they could. According to Nicholas Tawa, they “had an overriding cause to occupy all of their creative attention, the cause for freedom and against three brutal tyrannies.”<sup>282</sup> Barbara Tischler notes that the transition from New Deal radicalism to wartime patriotism was straightforward enough: “For many composers, World War II brought a change from working in WPA projects to working for the government in uniform.”<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Kurt Weill, “The Future of the Opera in America,” *Modern Music* 14, no. 4 (1936): 183.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>282</sup> Tawa, 123.

<sup>283</sup> Tischler, 156.

This was not idle flag waving, and while cultural front modernists tended to tone down both their political and aesthetic radicalism, they composed significant works in the name of the war effort. Copland, touring Latin America and the Caribbean on a Guggenheim fellowship in the summer and fall of 1941, was in Havana on December 7. Within a week of his return to the United States, he wrote to his old cultural front colleague Archibald MacLeish, then serving as Chief of War Information to offer his services. MacLeish

referred me to Harold Spivacke, Chief of the Music Division, serving also as Music Chairman for the Army and Navy. But Spivacke responded, "I really cannot advise you about the possibility of getting into the army at the present moment..." Therefore I was delighted to get a letter from Andre Kostelanetz suggesting I compose a patriotic work: A musical portrait of a great American.<sup>284</sup>

The work was the unabashedly patriotic *Lincoln Portrait* for speaker and orchestra, first performed in 1942. Later that year, Copland composed *Fanfare for the Common Man*, commissioned by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. Blitzstein enlisted in the Army Air Corps in 1942 and composed the didactically patriotic *Airborne Symphony* for orchestra and narrator on a commission from the Army in 1945.<sup>285</sup> Weill renewed his collaboration with Bertolt Brecht in 1942 with "Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib?" ("What Was Sent to the Soldier's Wife?") an anti-war song broadcast to Nazi occupied Europe.

On the other hand, it was business as usual on the popular stage. Broadway virtually ignored the war. If anything, the popular theatre withdrew from the social commentary of *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Pins and Needles* and Weill's anti-war fable *Johnny Johnson* into an escapist reverie. "The Broadway musical did not display much

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<sup>284</sup> Copland and Vivian Perlis, *Copland: 1900 through 1942*, (New York: St. Martin's-Marek, 1984), 341.

<sup>285</sup> Music with a spoken narration became something of a modernist sub-genre during and immediately following the war years. Two other examples are Schoenberg's *Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte*, to a text by Byron, in 1942, and *A Survivor from Warsaw* in 1947.

interest in the war,” writes Jones, “and in fact during the war years developed very differently from the topical shows of the 1930s.”<sup>286</sup> Bordman argues that the war ushered in a period of sentimentalist retrenchment that only came to an end after the Korean War: “While war-born prosperity gave the theatre a momentarily healthy glow, it was the escapist turnback to real or exaggerated joys of a bygone Americana that became the war’s impressive and lasting contribution to the lyric stage.”<sup>287</sup>

The economics of the musical theatre also changed. A decline in the number of shows in production that had begun during the Depression accelerated during the war years, while the audiences and revenues increased. Jones notes that part of this was a dividend of wartime prosperity, “but also, with the reduced number of shows to choose from, long-running hits ran longer and ticket prices were higher than ever.”<sup>288</sup> Between 1938 and 1948, Broadway ticket prices rose more than 300 per cent. In 1938, the best tickets for the Mercury Theatre’s production of *Cradle* sold for \$2.20, while the best seats in the house for Weill’s *Street Scene* in 1947 went for \$6.00. In addition to the effects of wartime inflation, this reflected a change in the composition of the Broadway audience that paralleled a change in the audience for serious opera.

In fact, the opera audience underwent a transformation. As Levine points out, opera had become isolated from the popular audience at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but that isolation began to break down after the Second World War. The emergence of radio as a mass medium in the 1930s and the long-play record in the 1940s had a significant effect on *who* listened to opera and “serious” music, and how.

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<sup>286</sup> Jones, 128.

<sup>287</sup> Bordman, *American Musical Theatre*, 529.

<sup>288</sup> Jones, 128.

Through radio, recordings, and television, opera found an exciting new theatrical venue – the home audience. Advances in technology and mass media provided new avenues of dissemination for opera and new artistic challenges that would change the way opera in America was transformed, perceived and accepted.<sup>289</sup>

The broadcasts of Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra in the 1940s were an important part of this. “They were the most far-reaching, most publicized radio broadcasts (some were also televised) of the time,” notes John Dizikes. The Toscanini broadcasts, he argues, “were a bridge between the old and the new.”<sup>290</sup> In 1949 the per capita income in the United States was almost double that of any other country in the industrial world, and the new audience was swelled by a middle class flush with the dividends of postwar prosperity.<sup>291</sup> It was an audience that Broadway wanted to tap. Moreover, the cost of mounting musicals had skyrocketed: “with few exceptions, producing a musical replete with many and lavish sets and costumes, large cast, orchestra, and technical crews is astronomically more expensive than mounting a play.”<sup>292</sup> The stakes were high and Broadway producers sought a way to attract a potential crossover operatic audience.

Opera was never entirely foreign to Broadway. *Porgy and Bess* was operatic and Marc Blitzstein had conceived *The Cradle Will Rock* as a *Singspiel* in the mold of the new German opera. In the years following the Second World War, however, Broadway developed an operatic genre all its own. For the most part, “the Broadway operas” produced between 1947 and 1951 shared three characteristics: they were sung in English, their librettos strove for a realism quite unlike the escapist fare served up by conventional

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<sup>289</sup> Kirk, 233.

<sup>290</sup> John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 485.

<sup>291</sup> Patterson, 61.

<sup>292</sup> Jones, 161.

musicals, and they often featured trained opera singers in their casts. The “Broadway opera” may have been the wrong idea for the wrong time, however, since the “Broadway opera boom”<sup>293</sup> was both brief and, at best, a qualified failure.

Weill’s own *Street Scene* started things off in 1947 with a modest run at the Adelphi Theatre.<sup>294</sup> Weill had arrived in New York twelve years earlier after more than a year of wandering around Europe in exile from the Nazis. In that time he had developed a strong reputation as a composer of conventional musicals like *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938) and *Lady in the Dark* (1941),<sup>295</sup> but *Street Scene* was something different. Writing to his parents in 1946, he described it as “the biggest and most daring project I have undertaken over here so far, because this time I’m writing a real opera for the Broadway theatre.”<sup>296</sup> *Street Scene* was a traditional operatic story of love, betrayal and murder set in a New York tenement that nonetheless expressed some of the aesthetic preoccupations of *neue Sachlichkeit* in its setting and *Gebrauchsmusik* in its use of colloquial English. It opened at the beginning of the 1946 season at Adelphi, a month before *Finian’s Rainbow*, to rave reviews. Brooks Atkinson, veteran theatre critic of the *New York Times*, called it “a musical play of magnificence and glory.” Weill, he wrote, “has found notes to express the myriad impulses of [playwright Elmer Rice’s] poem and transmuted it into a sidewalk opera.”<sup>297</sup>

Other “Broadway operas” followed, notably Marc Blitzstein’s *Regina* in 1949, to a libretto by Lillian Hellman from her novel *Little Foxes*, and Gian Carlo Menotti’s

<sup>293</sup> Marc A. Roth, “Kurt Weill and the Broadway Opera,” in *Musical Theatre in America*, 271.

<sup>294</sup> This is available on CD. See Kurt Weill, *Street Scene*, Scottish Opera Radio and Chorus, John Mauceri, Decca 433 371-2, 2 CD.

<sup>295</sup> Weill’s American work was quite varied. In addition to his scores for Broadway, he composed the music to Maxwell Anderson’s 1936 anti-war fable *Johnny Johnson*, the railroad industry pageant *Railroads on Parade* for the 1939-1940 Worlds Fair, choral music and lieder.

<sup>296</sup> Quoted in Hirsch, 272.

<sup>297</sup> Atkinson, review of *Street Scene*, *New York Times*, 10 January 1947, 17

works *The Medium* and *The Telephone* (1947), and *The Consul* (1950).<sup>298</sup> However, the trend waned fairly quickly in the face of audience indifference and Broadway producers' growing resistance to staging anything labeled an *opera* in their theatres. Lehman Engel, noting that Broadway producers were "made uneasy by the very word 'opera,'" commented that they "must know in advance what it is they have to present, and the operas produced by them have to stand or fall by audience response."<sup>299</sup> The audience response to "Broadway opera" was rarely enthusiastic. *Street Scene*'s 148-performance run at the Adelphi might have been impressive by the standards of the Metropolitan Opera, which typically staged less than a dozen performances of any given opera each season, but it was extremely disappointing on Broadway and "made little or no money for its backers."<sup>300</sup>

Weill's subsequent work, *Lost in the Stars*, to a libretto by Maxwell Anderson based on Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*, fared somewhat better than *Street Scene*, closing early after 280 performances in 1949, but at least \$45,000 in debt. Blitzstein's *Regina* was a qualified disaster,<sup>301</sup> opening the day after *Lost in the Stars* and closing after 56 performances. Menotti's operas enjoyed somewhat more success during the heyday of "Broadway opera." *The Consul* was named the best musical play by the New York Drama Critics despite the fact that, as Bordman contends, "none of its music had popular appeal outside the theatre and although its tale was rank topical melodrama."<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> *Carmen Jones*, which opened in 1943, had been enormously successful, but it was simply a translation and adaptation of Bizet's opera by Oscar Hammerstein, and not an original work.

<sup>299</sup> Lehman Engel, *The American Musical Theater*, rev. ed., (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 140.

<sup>300</sup> Taylor, 302.

<sup>301</sup> *Regina* was favourably reviewed.

<sup>302</sup> Bordman, *American Musical Theatre*, 573. *The Consul's* libretto tells the story of a woman who, unable to obtain papers to leave an unnamed Communist dictatorship, commits suicide.

Menotti's success on Broadway notwithstanding, by the mid-1950s, opera – both modern and Romantic – had retreated once again to the opera house. Despite Weill's call for an operatic style that would resonate with popular audiences as “an active, vital part of the modern theatre,”<sup>303</sup> and his and other composers' exertions to create it, “Broadway opera” never penetrated very deeply into the culture. The same theatre lovers who could hum “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning” from *Oklahoma!* were unlikely to recognize the “Lonely House” aria from *Street Scene*.

If the Second World War had shaken up American music, it had an equally profound effect on the mind of Leonard Bernstein. Trained entirely in the United States, but firmly in the European tradition, Bernstein had already begun to build a reputation around his native Boston by his senior year at Harvard University. Following the Nazi annexation of Austria in March, 1938, Bernstein, then 19, found his attachment to the Old World slipping away. He expressed his frustration and horror to Copland, his mentor and confidant: “God damn it Aaron, why practice Chopin mazurkas? Why practice even the Copland Variations? The week has made me so sick, Aaron, that I can't breathe any more.” Bernstein questioned his whole *raison d'être* as a musician and a composer:

With millions of people going mad – madder every day because of a most mad man strutting across borders – with every element that we thought had refined human living and made what we called civilization being actively forgotten, deliberately thrown back like railroad tracks when you look hard enough at them – what chance is there? Art is more than ever now proved entertainment – people, we thought, were ready, after two thousand years of refining Christianity, to look for entertainment as such; to look for things that come out of the category of vital necessity! And so we were willing to spend our lives creating that entertainment. Aaron, it's not feasible; it's a damned dirty disappointment.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Weill, “The Future of the Opera in America,” 187.

<sup>304</sup> Bernstein to Copland, 22 March 1938, ACC, box 247, folder 1.



This was a pivotal time for the young composer. He was about to graduate from Harvard and had no idea what to do next.

He had met Copland, entirely by accident. The elder composer was already Bernstein's musical idol. Marking Copland's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1970, he recalled that he considered him "the composer who would lead American music out of the wilderness, and I pictured him as a cross between Walt Whitman and an Old Testament prophet, bearded and patriarchal."<sup>305</sup> In Copland, Bernstein recalled, he had found a role model:

I had dug up and learned as much of his music as I could find; the *Piano Variations* had virtually become my trademark. I was crazy about them then – and I still find them marvelous today – but in those days, I especially enjoyed disrupting parties with the work. It was *the* furthest you could go in avant-garde "noise," and I could be relied upon to empty any room in Boston within three minutes by sitting down at the piano and starting it.<sup>306</sup>

Bernstein met his hero who, as it turned out, was beardless and resembled neither Whitman nor a prophet, in November, 1937. Copland invited the young student to join his birthday party at his 63<sup>rd</sup> Street loft to rub shoulders with New York's modernist music scene, and Bernstein sat down at the piano and began to play Copland's *Variations*. He remembered: "It must have startled everybody that this last-minute guest, whom nobody knew – a provincial college boy from Boston who had been to New York only once or twice before and who was now obviously thrilled to be in a *loft!*... with *artists!!* – was playing their host's ferocious work."<sup>307</sup>

By the time they met, Bernstein was already deeply influenced by the American voice pioneered by the modernists of the cultural front. He began with the premise that

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<sup>305</sup> Bernstein, "Aaron Copland at 70: An Intimate Sketch," in *Findings*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1982), 286.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 287.

American traditionalists who had tried to paste identifiably American motifs from native and African-American music over a Romantic idiom had “failed utterly to develop an American style or school or music at all.” Only the modernists, he argued, had succeeded in creating an authentic American voice:

Having ruthlessly revealed the invalidity of an Indian tune surrounded by Teutonic development, etc., I will try to show that there is something American in the newer music, which relies not on folk material, but on a native spirit, (like your music and maybe Harris' and Sessions' – I don't know), one which relies on a new American form, like Blitzstein's.<sup>308</sup>

Bernstein's thesis was an explicit statement of an Americanist credo. In “The Absorption of Race Elements into American Music” he proposed “a new and vital American nationalism”<sup>309</sup> for a nation of immigrants that transcended the “material” use of national or racial identity. If a composer “seeks to develop any one folk art, he is not characteristically American... He is faced with a situation in which there is no *common* American musical material.”<sup>310</sup>

He argued that the failure to develop an American music in the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries by composers like Harvey Worthington Loomis, Edgar Stillman Kelly and Edward MacDowell was due to their employment of American material to dress up a European idiom. According to Bernstein, “it was simply a case of artificial respiration; the new indigenous materials were merely imposed upon an otherwise neutral musical scheme, in order to give that scheme a new life and meaning.”<sup>311</sup> The key was to find those racial elements capable of attaining universality in American musical culture, which Bernstein located in the Anglo-Saxon traditions of New England and in the

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<sup>308</sup> Bernstein to Copland, 19 November 1938, ACC, box 247, folder 1.

<sup>309</sup> Bernstein, “The Absorption of Race Elements into American Music,” in *Findings*, 37. By “racial,” Bernstein meant “ethnic.”

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

rhythms of jazz. However, he was quick to point out that the common denominator was not the material idiom or quotations of popular and folkloric music, but an intangible spirit. Bernstein wrote:

We are constantly coming upon signs that point the way to an *American* music – American because the “feeling” is American. There may be a rebuttal to this, but I doubt it; travelers to this country speak of an American feeling or tempo, or rhythm. “*L’esprit américain*” has become a French idiom.<sup>312</sup>

In musical terms, Bernstein defined that intangible “feeling” in the harmonic textures of the Puritan chorale and, more importantly, in the improvised harmonies and rhythms of 20<sup>th</sup> century jazz: “the Negro scale, or scale variant, and the Negro rhythms (these are the two main items); supporting them, Negro tone color, and the contrapuntal feeling applied both melodically and rhythmically.”<sup>313</sup>

Bernstein’s analysis was inventive, if superficial. Despite its shortcomings, however, “The Absorption of Race Elements into American Music” demonstrates where the young composer’s own interest lay at the beginning of his career. Bernstein endorsed social dance rhythms, show tunes and blues-inflected harmonies, all of which he would incorporate in his efforts to create an “American” music. More importantly, he located the birth of a truly American idiom in the work of the American modernists of the 1920s and 1930s, singling out Copland and Roger Sessions for particular mention. This would be a common refrain. More than a decade later, in a 1950 lecture at Sinai Temple in Chicago on “What Makes Modern Music Modern,” Bernstein defined three kinds of “modern music:” the “natural,” the “unnatural,” like Schoenberg’s serialism; and the

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 53.

“experimental.” He located Copland among “natural” modernists like Stravinsky and Hindemith, and not among the serialists or experimentalists like Edgard Varèse.<sup>314</sup>

Although he had asserted that Blitzstein had created “a new American form” in his letter to Copland, he did not discuss his music – or musical theatre at all – in his thesis due to the project’s focus on concert music. In fact, Bernstein was extremely interested in the musical theatre. In a lecture at Brandeis University in 1952, he explained that “all musical cultures take root in the theatre.”<sup>315</sup> This was particularly the case in the United States, where the musical culture was still relatively young. “What is living now?” he asked, before enumerating “*Oklahoma*, *Finian*, etc., *Pal Joey*, *On the Town*,” and noting their “freshness” and “true American force.”<sup>316</sup> Out of this musical theatre, he later wrote “is emerging our opera, intelligible to all, exciting, real, and fitting. This is an exciting new movement, and Marc Blitzstein is its prophet.”<sup>317</sup> In his 1994 biography, Humphrey Burton notes that, “after Aaron Copland, Blitzstein was the American composer who had the greatest influence on Bernstein’s development as a composer and personality.”<sup>318</sup> Bernstein agreed. At a memorial concert for Blitzstein in 1985, he recalled that his mentor saw him as the “spittin’ reincarnation of himself. Now that was an honor. And still is, for me.”<sup>319</sup>

Bernstein’s first contact with Blitzstein came through *The Cradle Will Rock* and Copland. He had seen the play during its Mercury Theatre run on Broadway in the spring

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<sup>314</sup> Bernstein, lecture notes for “What Makes Modern Music Modern?” 6 February 1950, AMs, LBC, box 72, folder 10.

<sup>315</sup> Bernstein, lecture notes for “You, the Public,” Brandeis University, 13 May 1952, LBC, box 72, folder 17.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> Bernstein, “Blitzstein and our Musical Theatre,” TMs from pencil Ms, 11 October 1949, LBC, box 72, folder 7.

<sup>318</sup> Humphrey Burton, *Leonard Bernstein*, (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 52.

<sup>319</sup> Bernstein, speech, Marc Blitzstein Memorial Concert, 28 April 1985, TMs, LBC, box 97, folder 15.

of 1938 “and had freaked out with excitement to the point where I determined that I was going to get it on stage myself.”<sup>320</sup> Using their mutual friend Copland as a go-between, Bernstein arranged the rights to a production with the Harvard Dramatic Society in the spring of 1939.<sup>321</sup> The original plan was to stage *Cradle* off-campus at a Boston theatre, but local authorities refused a permit on grounds of “obscenity.”<sup>322</sup> After ten days of rehearsals with an amateur cast, including Bernstein’s teenaged sister Shirley as the Moll, the production opened at the Sanders Theatre in April 1939. Bernstein threw himself into the production with passion. Bernstein stuck faithfully to the “oratorio” staging used by the Mercury Theatre in 1938. The actors sat on chairs on the stage, rising and coming downstage for their scenes; Bernstein directed and accompanied from the piano. The only thing that would make it better, he wrote to Copland, would be if he and Blitzstein, his role models, were on hand for the performance: “Perhaps you could come up for my debut as a – well a Blitzstein. It would be great publicity & very cheering, in fact, if you'd bring Blitzstein with you. I hear he draws crowds.”<sup>323</sup>

Blitzstein did come up to Boston for the production which, by all accounts, was a success. “The reviews were wonderful, I thought, particularly for the play,” Blitzstein wrote to his protégé: “I knew that the extraordinary performance wouldn't go unnoticed and unsung – but I expected a certain condescension from reviewers in Boston confronted with a New York ‘legend.’” The elder composer was full of praise for Bernstein’s, and his cast’s, efforts:

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Copland suggested “why not write him directly and say you're the pianist I mentioned,” Letter to Bernstein, 1938, LBC, box 16, folder 44.

<sup>322</sup> John Briggs, *Leonard Bernstein: The Man, His Work, and His World*, (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1961), 33-34.

<sup>323</sup> Bernstein to Copland, spring, 1939, ACC, box 247, folder 1.

Nor did they overstate the excellence of you and Shirley and Donald and the rest. I made it fairly clear, I believe, that it all packed a thrilling wallop for me – second only to the original NY opening. I want to repeat it all; and to wave a bewildered cap in the air (I forget which Ovidian figure that is) at the speed, efficiency and talent you got it on.<sup>324</sup>

Bernstein's relationship with Blitzstein remained close, both personally and professionally. He staged a revival of *Cradle* in 1941, conducted the premiere recording of the *Airborne Symphony* in 1946 and provided the piano accompaniment for the recording, by baritone Walter Scheff, of Blitzstein's song "Dusty Sun" the same year.

As his prominence grew, Bernstein became Blitzstein's greatest champion, nominating the *Airborne Symphony* for the Pulitzer Prize in 1946 and again in 1947. In 1952, he conducted a concert performance of Blitzstein's new adaptation of the *Threepenny Opera* at the first Brandeis University Arts festival. In 1964 Bernstein announced that he would complete *Idiots First*, one of three operas Blitzstein had left unfinished at the time of his death.<sup>325</sup> Bernstein biographer Meryle Secrest notes that "he could, theoretically, have had a free hand with all three works, since he and Copland were executors of Blitzstein's estate." Nothing ever came of the project, but Secrest claims that: "had Bernstein been capable of finishing any of them, there is little doubt that he would have, given his enormous admiration for one of his mentors and the outrage he must have felt at the circumstances of his death."<sup>326</sup>

After the Boston triumph of *Cradle*, Bernstein enthusiastically followed Blitzstein's lead into musical theatre. Aside from his two symphonies, *Jeremiah* (1943) and *Age of Anxiety* (1949), virtually all of his major work composed between 1939 and

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<sup>324</sup> Blitzstein to Bernstein, 2 June 1939, LBC, box 8, folder 30.

<sup>325</sup> The other two were *The Magic Barrel* which, like *Idiots First*, was based on a story by Bernard Malamud, and *Sacco and Vanzetti*, a commission from the Metropolitan Opera. Blitzstein was murdered in Martinique in March 1964, after picking up a local man and two Portuguese sailors.

<sup>326</sup> Meryle Secrest, *Leonard Bernstein: A Life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 304.

1957 was for the stage. Bernstein composed incidental music for *Peter Pan* in 1950, and for Jean Anouilh's *The Lark* in 1955; his two major ballets were *Fancy Free* in 1943 and *Facsimile* in 1947.<sup>327</sup> On *Fancy Free*, Bernstein teamed-up with Jerome Robbins, a hot, young Broadway choreographer. The ballet, about three sailors on liberty in New York City, and their efforts to pick up girls, opened at the Metropolitan Opera in March, 1944 to rave reviews, though the raves were more for Robbins's choreography than for Bernstein's music.

In the flush of success, set designer Oliver Smith suggested that Bernstein and Robbins turn the ballet into a full-length musical comedy. *On the Town* opened at the Adelphi Theatre on December 28, 1944, to glowing reviews. In the *New York Times*, theatre critic Lewis Nichols called it "the freshest and most engaging musical show since the golden day of *Oklahoma!*"<sup>328</sup> *On the Town* "ran for 436 performances – a respectable tally, although not the huge hit that had been prophesied."<sup>329</sup> In 1953, Bernstein composed the score for *Wonderful Town*. However, despite that show's successful 500 performance run and its subsequent adaptation into a movie, it was Bernstein's last effort in the conventional Broadway idiom.

No matter how accomplished he might have been as a Broadway composer, Bernstein's real passion was not the popular stage, but the opera. His goal, which he articulated in 1948, was, like that of Antheil and Blitzstein, to create a uniquely American opera that was relevant to an American music. This musical credo would characterize his best-known works:

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<sup>327</sup> Bernstein's own recording of *Fancy Free* is available on CD. See Leonard Bernstein, *Candide Overture / Symphonic Dances from West Side Story / On the Waterfront Symphonic Suite / Fancy Free*, New York Philharmonic, Leonard Bernstein, Sony Classical SMK 63085, CD.

<sup>328</sup> Lewis Nichols, "The Play," *New York Times*, 29 December, 1944, 11.

<sup>329</sup> Burton, 135.

I have a basic interest in theatrical music. Most of my scores have been, in one way or another, for theatrical performance; and the others – most of them – have an obvious dramatic basis. I rather glow with pride at this discovery, rather than feel vulnerable, since I can count such masters as Mozart, Weber, and Strauss as similarly disposed. Where it will lead I cannot tell; but if I can write one real, moving American opera that any American can understand, (and which is notwithstanding a serious musical work) I shall be a happy man.<sup>330</sup>

Bernstein's first attempt to achieve that ambition was *Trouble in Tahiti*, a one-act opera composed in 1951 and dedicated to Blitzstein.<sup>331</sup> It featured a dysfunctional married couple who come to the realization that they are no longer in love. In fact, Bernstein based them on his own parents, Sam and Jennie. Halfway into the composition, he wrote to his sister Shirley, "there are so many aspects of it that only you could understand, libretto-wise as well as musically, and it's a bore to have to figure out everything for myself. The two characters, by the way, have gotten themselves named Sam and Jennie, and I think you'll see why."<sup>332</sup> By the time the opera was completed, "Jennie" had been renamed "Dinah." Sam and Jennie bear an uncanny resemblance to Hindemith's unhappy couple, Eduard and Laura, in *Neues vom Tage*. Musically, the opera is strongly influenced by Copland's and Blitzstein's American modernism. Though hardly atonal, it makes great use of dissonance and tone clusters and freely borrows from jazz and popular music. Bernstein obviously believed he was onto something with the short opera and, while composing it, he wrote excitedly to his secretary and assistant Helen Coates: "I

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<sup>330</sup> Bernstein, "Me Composer – You Jane," *Findings*, 131. This statement is filed in the Bernstein Collection with correspondence from and to Edgard Varèse (LBC, box 56, folder 19) and is dated 14 November 1948.

<sup>331</sup> *Trouble in Tahiti* was recorded once. See Leonard Bernstein, *Trouble in Tahiti / Facsimil.*, New York Philharmonic Orchestra, Leonard Bernstein, Sony Classical SMK 60969, CD.

<sup>332</sup> Bernstein to Shirley Bernstein, 16 May 1951, LBC, box 7, folder 5.



have become tremendously absorbed in my work and see years of exciting experiment and delving ahead of me.”<sup>333</sup>

*Trouble* was not the success that Bernstein had hoped it would be. Its premiere at the Brandeis Art Festival in June, 1952, was a logistical disaster. Few journalists had stayed for the show, but the few who did gave it lukewarm reviews. Howard Taubman of the *New York Times* damned it with faint praise as “a skilful study for a fine opera that Mr. Bernstein is yet to write.”<sup>334</sup> After Bernstein rewrote the last scene, *Trouble* was broadcast on NBC’s *Television Opera Theatre* the following November to tepid reviews.

The following year, Blitzstein librettist Lillian Hellman approached Bernstein with the idea of adapting *Candide* for the musical stage. In the red-baiting atmosphere of the anti-Communist witch hunts, Voltaire’s anti-clerical satire of the Holy Inquisition seemed to have a special resonance. Hellman herself was a victim of the House Un-American Activities Committee, having refused to name names. Bernstein adopted a deliberately eclectic style. Some of the music was pure Broadway, some spoofed Viennese operetta, and other numbers were very modern, as though Bernstein was trying out different styles.

There were encouraging signs halfway through the composition process. Coates wrote to Bernstein that producer Ethel Reiner had been impressed by a run-through: “She said she could tell me that they feel it is a ‘brilliant work and that everyone who has been to the auditions has been bowled over by it.’”<sup>335</sup> The audiences for the tryouts in Boston in the fall of 1956 were less enthusiastic. The Boston critics noted that, in condensing Voltaire’s book and dividing it into theatrical scenes, Hellman and Bernstein had created

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<sup>333</sup> Bernstein to Helen Coates, 4 May 1951, LBC, box 14, folder 2.

<sup>334</sup> Howard Taubman, “Bernstein Opera Has its Premiere,” *New York Times*, 14 June 1952, 12.

<sup>335</sup> Coates to Bernstein, 20 April 1955. LBC, box 14, folder 2.

a large, confusing mess.<sup>336</sup> After weeks of frantic pruning and rewriting, *Candide* finally opened on Broadway on December 1.<sup>337</sup> Aside from Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times*, who praised the “brilliant musical satire,”<sup>338</sup> New York critics tended to agree with their colleagues in Boston. In the New York *Herald Tribune*, Walter Kerr called it “a really spectacular disaster.”<sup>339</sup> The show closed after only 77 performances.<sup>340</sup> Humphrey Burton suggests that *Candide* failed because it departed from Broadway musical conventions and “there were not enough theatre-goers of sophisticated taste in New York to support the show past a couple of months.”<sup>341</sup> While this might have been the case, it raises the question of why *West Side Story*, which was also perceived as a departure from convention, would succeed a few months later.

Bernstein had been working on, or at least thinking about, *West Side Story* for eight years by the time *Candide* closed in 1957. Jerome Robbins had approached him in January, 1949 with a simple proposal to update Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* in a contemporary setting. It was not an entirely original idea. *Kiss Me Kate*, which had opened to raves less than a month earlier, demonstrated that Shakespeare could play very well on the musical stage. Bernstein and Robbins enlisted Arthur Laurents to write the libretto about an inter-faith romance between a Catholic Romeo and a Jewish Juliet in the tenements of the Lower East Side during Easter and Passover celebrations.<sup>342</sup> The *New York Times* reported that “the latest song and dance project taking its inspiration from a

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<sup>336</sup> Burton, 261.

<sup>337</sup> A 1997 Broadway cast recording of the 1989 version of *Candide* with a revised libretto by Hugh Wheeler is available from RCA Victor, See Bernstein, Leonard, *Candide*, 1997 Broadway Cast Recording, Eric Stern, RCA Victor 09026-68835-2, CD.

<sup>338</sup> Atkinson, “The Theatre: ‘Candide,’” *New York Times*, 3 December, 1956, 39.

<sup>339</sup> Walter Kerr, review of *Candide*, *New York Herald Tribune*, 3 December, 1956, 17.

<sup>340</sup> Bordman counts only 73 performances.

<sup>341</sup> Burton, 262

<sup>342</sup> Bernstein, “Excerpts From a *West Side Story* Log” in *Findings*, 147.

work of the Bard's is a modern music drama, as yet untitled, based on *Romeo and Juliet*." Theatre-goers would not have to wait long: "according to the present scheme of things, the musical will arrive in New York next season."<sup>343</sup>

Despite the collaborators' original enthusiasm, they abandoned the project within a few months. According to Burton, "Laurents was having mixed feelings about the project for both personal and creative reasons: he did not want to be the forgotten opera librettist of the collaboration."<sup>344</sup> Laurents may have had a point; he was certainly the junior member of the creative team, and as much as *West Side Story* was a collaborative effort, its final character was determined more by its music, choreography and stagecraft than by its dramatic text. Whatever the initial intentions, by the time the creative team resumed the project in 1955, with Stephen Sondheim recruited to write lyrics, *West Side Story* had become an operatic project in Bernstein's mind.<sup>345</sup>

When it opened at the Winter Garden, on September 26, 1957, after tryouts in Philadelphia and Washington, neither audiences nor critics were entirely sure just what they were seeing and hearing. *Newsweek* struggled to define the show and found that "there is no easy tag to hang on *West Side Story* – whose story is that of a contemporary Romeo and Juliet in New York City. It is not opera or operetta, musical comedy, ballet or a song-and-dance revue with a timid message."<sup>346</sup> With the exception of the *Herald-Tribune's* Kerr, who complained that the show was neither well-sung nor well-acted,<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Louis Calta, "'Romeo' to receive Musical Styling," *New York Times*, 27 January 1949, 19.

<sup>344</sup> Burton, 187.

<sup>345</sup> The original Broadway cast recording is available on CD. See Leonard Bernstein, *West Side Story*, Original Broadway Cast Recording, Columbia CK 32603, CD.

<sup>346</sup> "The Show's the Thing," *Newsweek*, 7 October 1957, 102.

<sup>347</sup> Burton, 276.

the reviews were generally positive, if perplexed. The critics followed Kerr's lead and praised "the brilliance of the choreographer."<sup>348</sup>

Nevertheless, audiences and critics left the Winter Garden scratching their heads. Scott Miller writes that the show "was a big shock to the Broadway audiences of 1957, with its intricately integrated dance, dissonant, driving, jazz-inspired score, its gritty frightening sets, its assault on the well-protected sensibilities of theatergoers."<sup>349</sup> Praising the show's "admirable" workmanship, Atkinson objected that "the material is horrifying."<sup>350</sup> *Newsweek* echoed the puzzlement of audiences, noting that "no one leaves *West Side Story* singing or dancing."<sup>351</sup> *Time*'s reviewer called it a "near success," noting that "the romance almost always falls short of the gang warfare."<sup>352</sup> *The New Yorker*'s Wolcott Gibbs ultimately captured the overall tone of the critical reaction:

*West Side Story* isn't, I'm afraid, an operation that will bring much comfort to those who still visit musicals in the wistful hope of seeing valor overcome a certain number of obstacles to capture beauty in the end; of laughing at a set of celebrated and generally reliable clowns; of listening to a collection of songs that can be reproduced more or less accurately in the taxi on the way home... The men who collaborated on the work at the Winter Garden have other and sterner ideas, and their offering contains almost none of these delights.<sup>353</sup>

*West Side Story* simply did not fit within the traditions of American musical theatre.

Like *The Cradle Will Rock*, *West Side Story* is difficult to categorize. A large part of Bernstein's "Excerpts from a *West Side Story* Log,"<sup>354</sup> published in *Playbill* the week it opened, dealt with just what *kind* of show it was. The entry for January 6, 1949,

<sup>348</sup> "New Musical in Manhattan," *Time*, 7 October 1957, 48.

<sup>349</sup> Scott Miller, *From Assassins to West Side Story: The Director's Guide to Musical Theatre*, (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1996), 221.

<sup>350</sup> Atkinson, "Theatre: The Jungles of the City," *New York Times*, 27 September 1957, 14.

<sup>351</sup> "The Show's the Thing," 102.

<sup>352</sup> "New Musical in Manhattan," 48.

<sup>353</sup> Wolcott Gibbs, "Hoodlums and Heiresses," *The New Yorker*, 5 October 1957, 64.

<sup>354</sup> "Excerpts from a *West Side Story* Log" purported to be a selection of entries from Bernstein's journal.

captured the sense of confusion. While the story was important, “it’s all much less important than the bigger idea of making a musical that tells a tragic story in musical-comedy terms, using only musical-comedy techniques, never falling into the ‘operatic’ trap.” Bernstein wondered if such a thing might succeed: “It hasn’t yet in our country.”<sup>355</sup> In the entry for March 17, 1956, however, Bernstein noted that his chief problem was “to tread the fine line between opera and Broadway.”<sup>356</sup> A quarter of a century later, Laurents wrote to Bernstein “you accused me of saying a hundred years ago that ‘I didn’t want to write the libretto for a fucking Bernstein opera.’” He wrote that, in his mind, at least, *West Side Story* was something different and new that the word “opera simply did not describe:

No, the word we all used for “West Side” was simply “show”. It evolved into a landmark of musical theatre because there was no category hanging over our heads and thus each was free to do his best, his most original, his most free, given the nature of the subject and the material. “Opera”, any word is, I think, limiting and tends to summon pretentiousness.<sup>357</sup>

Laurents refused to be confined by the conventions of European opera. In his mind, *West Side Story* was simply musical theatre: “I think musical theatre can be more exciting, more dramatic: there are no rules.”<sup>358</sup>

Even if his goal was to walk the line between opera and musical, Bernstein worked from an operatic perspective in *West Side Story* even more than *Candide*. In his history of American opera, John Dizikes places *West Side Story* firmly within a tradition of “New York opera” that included, but was not limited to “Broadway opera.” The New York opera was not opera in the traditional sense: instead, “these American dramas-by-

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<sup>355</sup> Bernstein, “Excerpts From a *West Side Story* Log,” 147.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>357</sup> Arthur Laurents to Bernstein, winter 1980. LBC (unclassified).

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

means-of-music were something else.”<sup>359</sup> Yet, in its modernism, Dizikes notes that *West Side Story* was quite different from *Street Scene*, the works of Menotti, even *Oklahoma!* According to Dizikes, it was “an effort by New York opera to escape from its own rigidifying conventions, and it did so by means of a highly stylized realism and a passionate, agitated musical score.”<sup>360</sup>

By resolutely refusing to *be* an opera, *West Side Story* was very much a culmination of the German operatic renovation. Bernstein was certainly aware of the project: his mentors, Copland and Blitzstein, had been two of its principal American proponents.

Through Marc I came to feel that I knew Kurt Weill, his drives, his courage, his foibles and his great humanity. At one point I became so intensely involved with Marc's translation of Mahagonny (alas, uncompleted) that I felt I was actually in the presence of the master.<sup>361</sup>

He had performed Weill's work, was familiar enough with Hindemith to write a eulogistic essay in 1964, and had been at least casually acquainted with Krenek, then at upstate Vassar College.<sup>362</sup>

*West Side Story* also showed signs of a deliberate application of the German modernist aesthetic. Even before the curtain rose on the first scene, Bernstein had dispensed with the overture, a standard of both traditional opera and conventional Broadway musicals. Unlike the “Broadway opera,” which brought operatic performers to the Broadway stage, *West Side Story*'s use of non-operatic performers like Larry Kert and Chita Rivera was much more in line with *Singspiel* and *Zeitoper*, which frequently

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<sup>359</sup> Dizikes, 503.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 507.

<sup>361</sup> Bernstein, Statement regarding Kurt Weill, for a catalog in a Weill exhibition, 23 September 1976, TMs, LBC, box 90, folder 19.

<sup>362</sup> There is one letter from Krenek in Bernstein's papers, and one from Lotte Lenya.

employed actors and cabaret-singers like Lotte Lenya. Nevertheless, even if *West Side Story* is not explicitly an opera, much of its music is *operatic*. This is particularly true of “The Rumble,” the set-piece quintet that concludes the first act. Joseph Swain argues that it is very similar to the ensemble set-pieces of European opera: “Its classical, almost Mozartean design allows each character a solo to explain himself in the first half of the composition, and only then, after all sentiments have been clearly expressed, does the piece give way to contrapuntal invention to achieve its purely musical climax.”<sup>363</sup>

Bernstein’s music is simple and melodic in the love duets “Tonight” and “Somewhere,” but harsh, driving and frequently dissonant in the “Prologue” and “The Rumble.” He makes liberal use of non-musical elements, like the gang whistle and finger-snapping in the opening prologue, and employs popular dance rhythms in the rhumba and cha-cha in the “Dance at the Gym” scene. Even “America,” the Sharks’ satirical paen to the emptiness of the American Dream, is an ironic echo of the promise held out in the final chorus of *Jonny Spielt Auf*, “Die Stunde schlägt der alten Zeit” and in *Neues vom Tage*’s “Kino! Zirkus! Theater! Variété!”

With its violence, stylized realism, driving score and utter subversion of Broadway convention, *West Side Story* was something unexpected and unprecedented. Unlike *The Music Man*, which opened three months later and became, both commercially and critically, the smash hit of the 1957-1958 season, *West Side Story* subverted Broadway convention by presenting a tragedy set in the modern slums and suffused with modernist cynicism. By contrast, Meredith Willson’s comedy is set in a mythical Iowa of sentimental nostalgia, clad in pastel colours, boater hats and barbershop harmonies. The

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<sup>363</sup> Swain, “Operatic Conventions in the American Musical,” in *Opera and the Golden West*, eds. John L. Di Gaetani and Joseph P. Sirefman, (London: Associated University Presses, 1994), 297.

only trouble in River City is a pool table and a con-man who predictably falls for, loses, and then wins, the girl and is redeemed by love.

*West Side Story* was very much a manifestation of the historical moment, or as Robbins recalled at a symposium in 1985, “it was part of the times.” Sondheim added “we were making a poetic interpretation of a social situation.”<sup>364</sup> At the time *West Side Story* opened on Broadway, the United States was in the middle of what James Gilbert calls “The Great Fear,” when “Americans worried deeply about the rise in juvenile delinquency.”<sup>365</sup> Indeed, he notes that concern peaked from 1953 to 1958. The teenage crime wave was probably more perceived than real for, according to Gilbert, “the incidence of juvenile delinquency does not appear to have increased enormously during this period.”<sup>366</sup> However, James T. Patterson observes that, in the late 1950s, the ephemeral postwar consensus seemed to be coming apart, creating deep apprehension in American life.

Many of these fears about juvenile delinquency, rock ‘n’ roll, and youthful rebellion reflected contemporary confusion and anxiety amid the rapid social, demographic, and economic changes that were transforming the nation. They also addressed real phenomena, for increasing numbers of the young were indeed beginning to rebel against accepted ways.<sup>367</sup>

The postwar baby boom could only have aggravated these anxieties. Birthrates peaked in 1947, but would remain well above pre-war levels until 1964. According to Patterson, “the total number of babies born between 1946 and 1964 was 76.4 million, or almost

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<sup>364</sup> *West Side Story* Symposium transcript, 18 April 1985, TMs, LBC, box 97, folder 13.

<sup>365</sup> James Gilbert, *Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 63.

<sup>366</sup> Gilbert, 66.

<sup>367</sup> Patterson, 373.



two-fifths of the population in 1964 of 192 million.”<sup>368</sup> In 1957, with the first cohort of baby boomers poised to enter adolescence, the implications were dire.

To make matters worse, more teenagers had more disposable income than ever before. A trend of youth employment that had begun during the Second World War increased in the postwar economic expansion, particularly in service industries. By the middle of the 1950s, Gilbert observes, “about half the high-school-age population joined the labor force for some time during the year.”<sup>369</sup> Adolescents had money to buy their own records, build hot-rods and hang out at the malt shop. According to Gilbert, “burgeoning consumer independence lay behind the rapid growth of separate teenage culture.”<sup>370</sup> That undermined the cultural unanimity of the postwar consensus, but it also posed a direct threat to traditional authority.

In *Teenagers and Teenpics* Thomas Doherty writes that the image of adolescents prematurely adopting adult values and roles was particularly alarming: “It was for parent culture to bestow independence and power, not for teenage subculture to usurp it.”<sup>371</sup> Indeed, parents are almost completely absent from *West Side Story* and other authority figures – Lieutenant Schrank, Officer Krupke and Doc – are mostly ignored.<sup>372</sup> Tony and Maria create their own prematurely adult world by acting out a wedding fantasy. Yet it is only a fantasy. They fervently believe that, as the baby boom generation would later say, all they need is love, but they lack the maturity to overcome the obstacles of reality. John

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<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>369</sup> Gilbert, 20.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 19

<sup>371</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 87.

<sup>372</sup> The only appearance of a parent in *West Side Story* occurs in the fire escape scene, when Tony and Maria sing the “Tonight” duet and her father’s voice is heard from offstage.

Bush Jones notes that the libretto “became the vehicle for dramatizing the most singular of all the musical’s themes – the negative effects of naïve or excessive idealism.”<sup>373</sup>

A further source of anxiety went to the heart of what it meant to be American in the 1950s, and that was another of *West Side Story*’s central themes. Its two gangs, the “American” Jets and the immigrant Sharks, battle for turf and identity in Hell’s Kitchen. The postwar consensus celebrated an essentializing and assimilationist national identity, and Patterson writes that “Americans in the 1950s who heralded the view that ethnic consciousness was declining, like those who celebrated the advent of classlessness, could also point to developments that appeared to support their claims.”<sup>374</sup> Thanks to severely tightened entrance requirements, immigration rates were at an all time low. Yet, “Puerto Ricans, who as United States citizens were not subject to stringent immigration laws, jammed night flights from San Juan to New York City.”<sup>375</sup>

The ethnic consensus was tenuous, and the conflict between the Jets and the Puerto Rican Sharks in *West Side Story* reflects this. However, the Jets’ aggressive anti-immigrant Americanism is deeply ironic. They are all the children or grandchildren of immigrants. For example, Tony is really a Polish-American named Anton. In the end, two of the “Americans” and one of the Puerto Ricans are killed, and one is led off stage by the police. *West Side Story* claimed that, despite Tony’s and Maria’s innocent idealism, the realities for the “dangerous youth” of the 1950s were violence and death, making it “the first Broadway musical to seriously question the universality of the American Dream.”<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Jones, 194.

<sup>374</sup> Patterson, 326.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>376</sup> Jones, 193.

As much of a departure from Broadway convention as it was, *West Side Story* found an audience. It had an excellent, though not exceptional, first run of 732 performances over two years.<sup>377</sup> According to Jones, this “was impressive for just about any musical of the time, and especially for one as risky and innovative as *West Side Story*.”<sup>378</sup> Audiences began to dwindle in the first year of the run, and “the producers instituted a discount ticket policy (a two-for-one deal) and booked the show for a national tour.”<sup>379</sup> However, *West Side Story* soon emerged as a unique cultural phenomenon. Although audiences had at first found the show’s modernist score baffling, an original-cast recording released in 1958 was unexpectedly successful, and sold more than one million copies.<sup>380</sup> “Maria” became a hit single.

A modern tragedy about the futility and danger of youth acting outside of hegemonic social norms had deep resonance, both with audiences and the culture industry. According to Gilbert, “the film industry made delinquency one of its staple topics after the mid-1950s,”<sup>381</sup> and *West Side Story*’s topical libretto made it a hot property. By the spring of 1959, the show’s creators had signed a film contract with United Artists. In the *New York Times*, A.H. Weiler reported that Marlon Brando was interested in playing Tony, but was concerned that he might be too old for the role.<sup>382</sup> It was an unusually rapid transition from the stage to screen, especially considering that

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<sup>377</sup> Compared to *The Music Man*’s run of 1,375 shows, *West Side Story*’s numbers are a little less impressive.

<sup>378</sup> Jones, 193.

<sup>379</sup> Keith Garebian, *The Making of West Side Story*, (Toronto: ECW Press, 1995),

<sup>380</sup> Secrest, 220.

<sup>381</sup> Gilbert, 64.

<sup>382</sup> A.H. Weiler, “Passing Picture Scene,” *New York Times*, 31 May 1959, X5.

Warner Brothers did not acquire the rights to *The Music Man* – 1957's Broadway smash, and winner of all the major 1959 Tony Awards – for another 16 months.<sup>383</sup>

Director Robert Wise firmly placed the film in the juvenile delinquency genre by casting Natalie Wood as Maria. The queen of “troubled youth” movies, Wood had been celebrated for her roles in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Splendor in the Grass* (1960). At first, the film version of *West Side Story* was supposed to be “a little black and white picture,”<sup>384</sup> but the project was soon transformed into a wide-screen, Technicolor, stereophonic blockbuster. This was a significant change of plans: The movie that appeared in theatres in October, 1961 was an *important* film, complete with an intermission and a printed program. However, it wouldn't be just another juvenile delinquent picture with a rock and roll soundtrack. Instead, Bernstein's music was modernist and jazz-inflected: “it was as if he chose to pitch the film to adults, not teenagers.”<sup>385</sup> *West Side Story* aspired to the “universal audience” that Doherty argues had existed before the youth culture it documents threatened the postwar consensus.<sup>386</sup>

Its premiere was accompanied by enthusiastic reviews – though Pauline Kael characteristically damned the film<sup>387</sup> – and phenomenal ticket sales. While noting that it became less effective in the intimate scenes between Tony and Maria, *Newsweek* called the film “a great big glorious show.”<sup>388</sup> The music “is as subtle and beautiful as ever, and the adapted choreography of Jerome Robbins is as original and vivid as anything ever put

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<sup>383</sup> Eugene Archer, “Warners to Make Movie of ‘Gypsy,’” *New York Times*, September 21, 1960, 43. *The Music Man* is available on DVD. See Meredith Willson, *The Music Man*, Robert Preston, Shirley Jones, Warner Bros. 16768, DVD.

<sup>384</sup> Garebian, 144.

<sup>385</sup> Gilbert, 193-194.

<sup>386</sup> Doherty, 2.

<sup>387</sup> Burton, 325.

<sup>388</sup> “Tragedy in Overdrive,” *Newsweek*, 23 October 1961, 101.

on screen.”<sup>389</sup> Bosley Crowther hailed it as a “cinema masterpiece”<sup>390</sup> in the *New York Times* while the *Times* of London raved that “the whole thing crackles and explodes with vitality.”<sup>391</sup>

The film adaptation of *West Side Story* was embraced by audiences and the culture industry. It was the second highest grossing American movie of 1961, after *101 Dalmatians*, and by the end of its first year, it had played in 410 theatres worldwide. It ran in France continuously until 1967. The film industry enthusiastically endorsed *West Side Story*’s aesthetic and message at the 1962 Academy Awards, where it won ten Oscars, including best motion picture. Encouraged by the movie’s success, the Broadway show was revived 1964, and again in 1965 and 1980. Bernstein’s musical tragedy has become deeply embedded in American culture, to the point where, like *Romeo and Juliet*, it is an instantly recognizable icon for impossible romance and naïve idealism.

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>390</sup> Bosley Crowther, “Screen: ‘*West Side Story*’ Arrives,” *New York Times*, 19 October 1961, 39.

<sup>391</sup> “No Relaxing at *West Side Story*,” *The Times* (London), 27 February 1962, 13.

## CONCLUSION

The emergence and normalization of modernism in American musical theatre was part of a complex transnational cultural interaction. It was, in fact, as much a process of cultural transfer as normalization. *West Side Story* was the culmination of the operatic renovation project initiated by radical modernist composers in Weimar Germany and adopted by their colleagues in America. The generation of Weill and Krenek redefined the opera in their disillusionment with musical traditions and in response to the bankrupt “universal truths” of the old order.

The goals of the German renovation was clear: to create an operatic aesthetic for a new age and to liberate it from what Weill called the “splendid isolation” of the opera house. Emerging in the first promise of the Weimar Republic in the mid-1920s, it embraced modernity in all its manifestations, reflecting the contemporary experiences of both the audience and the composer. The new German opera integrated the sounds and cadences of popular music and jazz, constructing an imagined America that exemplified the modern world.

The American composers of the 1920s and 1930s had similar aspirations. The generation of Antheil and Blitzstein had directly participated in the European modern music scene between the wars and they found their own voice in a musical idiom that both challenged and subverted parochial musical traditions. Their project to create an indigenous musical tradition and a distinctly American operatic theatre free of the “accessory baggage” of European Romanticism was deeply informed by this contact.

American modernist composers were not merely influenced by the German renovation, they consciously adopted both its subversive aims and aesthetic vocabulary virtually intact.

The first part of this project occurred in the late 1930s with Marc *Blitzstein's The Cradle Will Rock*. Uniquely American in its themes and setting, *The Cradle Will Rock* captured the kind of socially engaged musical theatre that typified the modernist German aesthetic. But despite achieving minor critical success, Blitzstein's work was soon forgotten amidst the emergency context of World War II and the consensus, conservative political climate of the postwar period. Yet the modernist aesthetic did not die out altogether but was taken up in the late 1950s by Blitzstein's protégé, Leonard Bernstein. A celebrity figure in American music, Bernstein transposed the aesthetic vocabulary of the German operatic renovation for a popular audience through *West Side Story*, a surprise Broadway hit that became an overnight sensation as a Hollywood musical. Although Bernstein's work articulated period values regarding juvenile delinquency and ethnicity, it also normalized the modernist aesthetic within the dominant political discourse of late 1950s and early 1960s America.

The success of the film version of *West Side Story* was a singular moment in American cultural history. The culmination of more than two decades of cultural adaptation and transfer, it made modernism familiar to mainstream audiences by weaving a variation of the German aesthetic into the fabric of popular culture. But as the later work of Bernstein's collaborator, Stephen Sondheim, also reveals, the enduring ramifications of this process for American musical theatre were equally profound, for the

success of *West Side Story* was “the major influence” transforming Broadway musical conventions in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid. Of Sondheim’s post-*West Side Story* works, Dizikes writes “operas they are, and of an especially compelling and disturbing kind.” (509)



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