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Abstract:

Kurt Weill seems the opposite of a Modernist when compared with Schoenberg, or with the fictitious composer Adrian Leverkühn in Mann's *Doktor Faustus*—composers who seem furiously to reject the warm-hearted, *gemütlich* aesthetic of much nineteenth-century art. But in such works as *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Der Jasager*, Weill, like Thomas Mann himself, shows himself a Modernist of a sophisticated sort by devising a new sort of irony, an irony that does not reject bourgeois values but instead dwells in an interspace between derision and warmth.

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Kurt Weill as Modernist

What is Modernism? To me, there are two chief features. First, a tendency to extremes, a testing of the limits of aesthetic construction—if nineteenth-century art often seeks a safe center where the artist and the audience can be comfortable together, Modernist art often seeks the freakish peripheries of the artistic experience, regions of discomfort and confrontation. Jean Cocteau liked to say that tact in audacity was knowing how far to go too far¹; but much Modernist art consists of tactless aggression, aggressive overload of the sense organs, aggressive transgression of taboos, aggressive density of event, aggressive technicality, aggressive monotony, aggressive matter-of-factness, even (in the case of Satie) aggressive reticence. Second, a certain sense of dwelling inside paradox, since aesthetic extremes tend to converge: when T. S. Eliot, in 1921, first heard Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, he wrote that the music seemed to "transform the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor-horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric noises of modern life."² In other words, the most up-to-date factory noises were audible within an evocation of pagan Russia: the australopithecine and the man with the jackhammer inhabit exactly the same acoustic space, make the same sort of cry. Twentieth-century music is full of convergences of opposites: the line between excessively

expressive and excessively *sachlich* music can be thin; it is even true that music generated by purely random procedures can sound similar to music generated by the most rigorous precompositional system. The aged Stravinsky complained that “What I cannot follow are the manic-depressive fluctuations from total control to no control, from the serialization of all elements to chance”³; and if the distinction between chaos and cosmos is hard to make out, what hope is there for keeping other artistic polarities separate?

According to these notions of Modernism, the ideal Modernist composer is Adrian Leverkühn, the fictitious composer whose music is audible only within Thomas Mann’s novel *Doktor Faustus* (1947). In chapter XXI the narrator explains:

The always-dominant element in him was a will to go to extremes of expression, together with the intellectual passion for harsh order, the linearity of the old music of Netherlands. In other words: in his work, heat and cold held sway alongside each other, and sometimes, in moments of his greatest genius they forced themselves into each other, the *espressivo* seized the strict counterpoint, the objective blushed with feeling.⁴

Leverkühn’s music is impatient with all that is finite and temporal, always rushing off toward the far reaches of noise and silence, an apocalypse where heaven and hell are constructed out of identical musical materials. Extremity and the convergence of extremes have no finer example.

By the standards of Leverkühn, it would seem that an agreeable composer such as Kurt Weill, careless of posterity, eager to give pleasure, even familiar pleasure, to a wide audience, has no business among the Modernists. In fact, it would seem that Thomas Mann himself has no business among the Modernists: Mann’s novels were accepted by the Book of the Month club, and he wrote books that argue more strongly for basic bourgeois values (one of the mottos of his story “Das Gesetz” is that you should wash your hands before eating) than for the values of ferocious and disdainful aesthetes. Mann and Weill both found Stalin a less attractive leader than Franklin Delano Roosevelt (praised in Mann’s *Joseph, der Ernährer* and Weill’s *The Ballad of Magna Carta*).

But I think that both Mann and Weill were not only Modernists, but central figures in the development of Modernism. Both figured out that within the radical Modernists' strenuous repudiation of nineteenth-century affability and goodnaturedness there lurked danger: an art contemptuous of Dickens and Max Bruch might disable itself through its sheer fury of rejection of familiar pleasures. To avoid this, Mann and Weill worked out (independently of one another, of course) a new kind of irony, which seems to me a triumph of Modernist art.

Mann complained that people considered him a frigid, thin-lipped sort of ironist, whereas in fact he felt that the proper response to his comic scenes was warm belly-laughter⁵. But it is surely an astonishingly sophisticated sort of irony, this irony that inhabits a threshold space between derision and warmth. I said a moment ago that the convergence of extremes was a characteristic of Modernism; and so the proper irony for the Modernist movement is an irony pushed so far that it converges with straightforward discourse_-an irony that is ironic about its own ironicalness.

The concept of irony comes from Greek comedy: the eiron, or understater, was a character who said less than he knew; his opposite was the alazon, the overstater, who continually boasted of his glorious deed. The alazon was typically a soldier, whereas the eiron was a cunning slave_-and irony was originally a slave's sort of discourse, in which the speaker had to conceal his true meaning because he was at everyone's mercy. But what is socially a position of weakness, is artistically a position of power: to understate is to overload with meaning. The boaster speaks empty words, words that mean less than he says; the ironist speaks words that mean more than he says. In every age where semantic concentration has been an important virtue in art_-Horace's Rome, Swift's England, the whole Modernist period in Europe_-irony has flourished.

To show how advanced an ironist Weill could be, I will compare his practice with that of the official arch-Modernist Schoenberg. In the song *Gemeinheit* in *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), Schoenberg offers a brilliant caricature of the expressionist composer: Pierrot drills a hole in the

skull of Cassander, fills it with tobacco, and smokes this human pipe—a pipe that fumes away with a tiny piccolo cry. This is a self-parody, in that the huge orchestral resources of shrieking that Schoenberg had developed in *Erwartung* (1909) have dwindled to a puppet's little peep. For another example of Schoenberg as ironist I turn to a letter than Schoenberg wrote to Mann (17 Feb. 1947), offering him an extract from the *Encyclopedia Americana* of 1988 (!), stating that the twelve-tone system had been invented by Thomas Mann, who tolerated its appropriation by the thievish composer Arnold Schoenberg.⁶ Schoenberg was vexed by Leverkühn's expropriation of dodecaphony, and wanted credit—this explains why every copy of the novel ends with a patient little note explaining Schoenberg's property rights. In these examples, Schoenberg shows his real gifts as a traditional ironist: self-deprecation turns itself inside-out into an oblique self-praise.

Weill sometimes made use of this traditional irony. For example, in *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (1930), the ninth number begins with a piano playing a sentimental turn-of-the-century tune, *The Maiden's Prayer*—Jakob comments, *Das ist die ewige Kunst* (That's immortal art!). This gives the audience a pleasure thrill of sarcasm: we might say that the only immortal art is the art that makes fun of art. If Weill had gone further down this road, he might have come to the paralysis of Mann's Leverkühn, who despairs of art itself: “Why does almost everything have to seem to me like its own parody? Why does it have to appear to me that almost all, no, all the means and customs of art *were today only fit for parody?*”⁷ *Pierrot Lunaire* also seems to be headed in this direction—there are a good number of relations between the real Schoenberg and the fictitious Leverkühn. But elsewhere in Weill's work we find a subtler irony, both more insidious and more humane.

For example, the *Zuhälter-Ballade* in *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928) is a magician's hat with a seemingly endless supply of false bottoms. Weill and Brecht seemed to have conceived the operations of its irony in rather different terms. Brecht felt glee at the thought of the audience of *The Threepenny Opera* swooning over a romantic duet: “The tenderest and most

intimate love-song in the play [the *Zuhälter-Ballade*] described the everlasting, indestructible affection between a pimp and his best girl. Not without feeling, the lovers celebrated in song their little home, the brothel.”⁸ This is an effect difficult to achieve with either poetry or music, alone: it requires a deliberate misapplication of (sentimental) music to (low-life) text. The proper response to the *Zuhälter-Ballade* is not to remain detached and derisive, as the text might suggest; it is not to gush with warm sticky feelings for pimp and whore, as the music might suggest; it is first to gush, then to dislike oneself for being such a gull or ninny--to feel, and then to criticize one's feeling. The bourgeoisie should learn the inadequacy of its own Pavlovian responses to the theatre: to salivate identically over reminiscences of starry-eyed young love in a brothel and in a well-chaperoned middle-class parlor, might suggest a certain skepticism concerning the value of saliva. The interior tension between text and music generated an intriguing sort of ironic music-theatre.

Weill used language fairly similar to Brecht's in describing the effect of this number: he wrote in 1928 to his publisher that "the appeal [of the *Zuhälter-Ballade*] lies precisely in the fact that a somewhat risqué text . . . is composed in a tender, pleasant manner.”⁹ But Weill seems a good deal more comfortable with the tenderness than Brecht. Perhaps Weill was content to equivocate: to allow the song to dwell in a sort of limbo between an ironic (that is, Brechtian) artifact of revolution, and a regular *Schlager*. Brecht was uneasy about the popularity of the opera with the bourgeoisie: what does a revolutionary do when the tyrant himself keeps cheerfully singing, Down, down, down with tyranny? But Weill evidently enjoyed providing a combination of pointed pleasure and pointless pleasure. Brecht denounced those artists who provided delight as a middle-class commodity for whoring after lies; Weill tried his hand at something more difficult, namely whoring after truths.

Weill achieved this effect in the *Zuhälter-Ballade* by providing music that simultaneously pleases and finds ways of undoing or dismissing its own pleasure. Its Latin-American rhythms place it in a fairly large class in Weill's canon--the class of tango and semi-tangoid tunes that

preen themselves in their own factitiousness, in their inadequacy of response to the dramatic situation. Weill's tangos usually pertain to some idyll of abundance and sexual languor, *luxe, calme, et volupté*; in other words, tangos are appropriate for some place where you are not. Tangos are at once delusory and edifying, a species of music that whispers in one ear about a faraway land of delight while whispering in the other ear that you can't get there, or had better not get there. In *Der Lindberghflug* (1929), a tangoish rhythm accompanies the song of Sleep, who tells the exhausted aviator that the night is over and it's time to relax his vigil; in *Happy End* (1930), the *Matrosen-Tango* conjures up first a sailors' *Schlaraffenland* of endless whisky, fine cigars, and cheap movies, then the sinking of the ship and the drowning of all hands—the tango dispells its own untruths; in *Marie Galante* (1933), the lyric that Fernay devised for Weill's orchestral tango (*Youkali*) erects a self-consciously flimsy paradise, a tiny island at the end of the world, where a fairy will take you for a guided tour of the country where all desires are gratified. A tango is, for Weill, a kind of music that dreams while mocking its dreaminess, while insisting on the meretricious quality of its own tinselly catchiness. This is how Weill tries to tell the truth: by writing music that lies, but that confesses, at least subliminally, its lying character.

But the possibility is never quite lost, that there might inhere a deeper truth in the dream of luxury and ease than in the sordor of our normal lives; Weill, unlike Brecht, assigns no particular privilege to discomfort and foulness, or even to skepticism. Weill is too comprehensive a Modernist to discount the Romantic force of wishing. Brecht wishes violently to strike out all lies, and shove our noses in the truth; but Weill sets up the real and the unreal on a single artistic plane, and allows us to choose what we will. We can laugh and weep, or we can hate ourselves for being the dupes of artistic illusion: Weill leaves open both a sentimental response and an ironic one, and therefore provides a kind of heuristic theatre, in which the audience is free to confront an intellectual challenge, or to lose itself in escapist dreams, as it sees fit. Weill seems instinctively to subvert Brecht's carefully contrived didacticism, by providing a curiously unsettled music drama, in which irony can bite the spectator who wishes to

be bitten, or in which irony can de-ironize itself, turn against itself, like a snake that swallows its own tail.

I'd like to discuss one other way in which Weill shows a strikingly Modernist spirit. In the world of nineteenth-century opera, there was an official term, *abuse of the minor*, used to describe the practice of writing too much sustained music in the minor mode_-this explains, for example, why the witches in Verdi's *Macbeth* sing a good deal of cheerful-sounding music. In the twentieth century, the issue is greatly broadened: not abuse of the minor, but abuse of the artistic medium; and in the domain of Modernism, abuse of the medium becomes, strangely enough, a species of excellence. When Duchamp takes a factory-made urinal, titles it *Fountain*, and signs it *R. Mutt*, the medium of sculpture is abused, but also made problematic and intriguing; when Brecht claims that drama shouldn't be drama, but instead epic, the medium of the theatre is similarly abused and stimulated. In the old days, one could either read a book, or watch a drama_-the two media were quite distinct. But suddenly, in the domain of Brechtian theatre, watching a drama turned into an event that was a kind of reading_-the stage is littered with texts of all sorts, chapter headings, billboards, moralistic banners, paraded around or dropped from the flies, as if a play were simply a book with live illustrations.

Weill, of course, cooperated with Brecht's vision of a text-theatre in many ways, especially in *Die sieben Todsünden*, a piece of surrealist theatre which artistic media are deformed and flogged in all sorts of ways; but I want to emphasize one particular direction in which Weill abused his artistic medium, by constructing a sort of music designed to be read. This is one of the most remarkable sorts of abuse to which the medium of music could possibly be subjected: it's questionable that music has any semantic content whatsoever_-to imagine a *legible* music seems almost completely preposterous. We read with our eyes, we hear with our ears_-everything conspires to deny to music any hope to transform itself into a visible text.

And yet, I think that in *Der Jasager* (1930)_-which seems to me his most controlled,

sustained, and imaginative experiment in writing music-theatre_ -Weill achieved just that. Weill thought that the ultimate resource of music-drama, the basic element of the art of the composer, was the *gestus*, the musical gesture that defined an attitude, a contortion of the body, a significant shape. In *Der Jasager* Weill achieved a number of extremely potent *gestus*, but *gestus* that are so remote and cold that they seem more like written text than like speech. It is an opera constructed of musical hieroglyphs.

The plot of *Der Jasager* was nicely summarized by Weill:

The main character in it is a boy. That already gave me the idea to let this play be performed by students. The content, briefly, is: the boy would like to go with the teacher on a journey, in order to fetch medicine from the city for his sick mother. The travel is dangerous; on that account, the mother doesn't want to let the boy go. Also the teacher advises against it. The boy goes, however, in order to help the mother. On the way, when they've come to the most dangerous place, he becomes weak and therefore endangers the whole band of travelers. They put to him the decision: should they turn back or should they follow the old rite [*Brauch*], which commands that the sick must be thrown down into the valley? The boy decides for the valley-hurling. "He has said Yes," sings the chorus. Some of the text is motivated differently by Brecht, compared to what is offered in the original Japanese text . . . we've considered that students should also *learn* something from a didactic play [*Lehrstück*]. For that reason, we've brought in the sentence about acquiescence [*Einverständnis*], namely: "The important thing to learn is acquiescence." Students should learn that. They should know that a community to which one is joined demands that one actually bears the consequences. The boy goes the way of the community to the end, when he says Yes to the valley-hurling.¹⁰

Though Brecht wrote an alternate text with a different ending, *Der Neinsager*, the whole musical style of *Der Jasager* forecloses all paths except the path of saying yes. Far from being sensitive to the psychic torment of a boy faced with an unbearable decision, Weill composed the most

unpsychological music of his life, music written exclusively from the point of view of the community, not the individual. There is no fork in *Der Jasager's* road: it is a study in inexorability, in a forced simplicity that precludes alternate behavior of any sort. It is Weill's supreme work of *gestus*, in that the motor rhythms, the inflexible melodic shapes, fix the domain of doing and feeling so precisely that the characters are mere puppets driven, so to speak, by the mechanical tracker action of the music. The *Ja*-hieroglyph in the music is deeply incised, unmistakable; it can't mean *Nein*, for it has no ambiguity whatsoever.

This work is spare on every level. The photographs of early performances show children in ordinary school-costume, as if it were a perfectly normal thing for uncooperative children to be thrown off Bavarian alps--I wonder whether the commonplace dress might not have heightened the eeriness of the ritual sacrifice, as in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery."

Furthermore, the stage set was as Spartan as possible:

It can be played in the school auditorium. In front, on the platform, is the stage. The chorus sits on or in front of the platform. In the middle of the platform a circle is drawn; in the middle of the circle is a door (the mother's room). In the second act the door is taken away, off to one side of the circle there's set up a platform with a staircase, which represents the mountain. You see, simplicity is the principle of this school opera. Also in the musical part. The orchestral and vocal parts are performed by students.¹¹

A play, any play, requires a series of entrances and exits, and a plot, any plot, entails some difficulty that must be overcome. In this sense, the bare essentials of theatre are (1) a door, and (2) a mountain. Samuel Beckett's stage settings--a pair of garbage cans, a tree in various states of blossom, an ash heap--are Zeffirellian extravagances compared to this economical sort of drama. But Beckett's plays, like *Der Jasager*, are investigations of nakedness, *théâtre pur*, the kind of drama that is left when everything non-dramatic has been rigorously pared away.

Weill's musical methods can be profitably studied in the eighth of the ten numbers of the score, near the beginning of the second act. Here the expedition reaches a waystation on the

mountain climb, and decides to rest; the boy announces that he feels unwell; the other children tell the teacher, who says that he's probably just exhausted from climbing; but everyone knows that the path above the hut follows a ledge, too narrow for carrying anyone, and it is possible that the sick boy will have to be flung down the cliffside. This number is pieced together from a handful of pattern-units, of which the most important is that of the opening two bars: the notes D-F-D, followed by a chord with G in the bass and D= and E= in the treble--that is, a sketch of D minor, followed by a 6/5 chord on E=, a kind of Neapolitan. In the following two-bar sequences, the first bar keeps steadily tromping its D-F-D, but this figure terminates in other chords: A⁷, then E=⁷; after this, the figure of the first bar opens outward to D-A-D, and still wider to B=-A-B=. The figure keeps straining toward cadence, but never achieves such gratification in a meaningful way; and finally it returns to exactly the same form it took in the first two bars. This pattern-unit is, I believe, a representation of a determined laborious ascent, an icon of trudge. It has a certain melodic and harmonic flexibility, but flexibility within narrow limits; Weill has constructed its changes not to illustrate a particular harmonic direction, but simply to illustrate a kind of pushing and pulling within the figure itself, a kind of interior tension. The figure dilates itself without developing, then contracts to its original shape: monotony is evaded without compromising the purity and isolation of the gesture.

This is what *gestic* music looks like when freed from all non-*gestic* elements. At the beginning of the piece, the resolute figure (scale degrees $\hat{1}-\hat{3}-\hat{1}=-2$ in the minor) doesn't extricate itself from the rest of the music: it *is* the music. What exactly is the *gestus* here, besides the physical motion of making your way over difficult terrain, taking three steps forward ($\hat{1}-\hat{3}-\hat{1}$), then planting your right foot on a stone that gives way, flattens beneath your weight ($=2$)? Perhaps the figure itself contains a clue to its own meaning. In Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762)--the great reform opera, itself a "prototype of opera"--the chorus of the Furies blocks Orpheus's way through Hades, and attempts to terrify him with the darkness, the mists, the howling of Cerebus. This chorus, in C minor, begins with a bar in which the chorus, in unison, sings the notes C-E=-C; then, moving to the dominant, G major, their first note in the second

bar is D--yielding a striking $\uparrow\text{-}\bar{3}\text{-}\uparrow\text{-}\rightarrow 2$ figure. Although Gluck's harmony is more conventional than Weill's, the Furies' figure and Weill's figure bear several strong points of relation: a near-identical melodic shape in 3/4 tempo, a hell-waltz.

In the infernal scene of *Orfeo*, Gluck discovered an important--perhaps the most important--way of creating a musical form for tragedy. For Gluck, and arguably for Sophocles and Euripides as well, tragedy is ultimately a matter of fists beating against walls: mankind struggling with and crying against the limits of the human condition. Gluck's scene in hell offers an extremely powerful musical representation of both the wall and the cry, as Orpheus pleads, with the simplest, most elegant pathos, against the barrier of the iron-hearted Furies--until at last they weep, the gate swings open, and Orpheus is allowed to proceed. Gluck's discovery that a tragedy could be conceived as a huge ritornello, in which a savage and implacable refrain was interrupted by the miseries of a solo voice, has had incalculable consequences in subsequent opera. It is easy to find wall-vs.-plaint oppositions everywhere, in Leonora's *Pace, pace* in Verdi's *La forza del destino* (1869), and the end of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (1927), in the fishwife's role in Dessau's *Die Verurteilung des Lukullus* (1951).

The $\uparrow\text{-}\bar{3}\text{-}\uparrow\text{-}\rightarrow 2$ figure in *Der Jasager* seems a spare sketch of a musical wall. Its *gestus* isn't simply walking, but also the necessity to walk, or else to be thrown down the side of the mountain. This figure is the musical equivalent both of the impulse that pushes the expedition forward, and of the old rite that demands that those unable to proceed must be killed. The harmonic frustration keeps dilating, without resolving: it thrusts the boy forward onto the path too narrow for him to walk. If there is a subliminal allusion here to Gluck, it is perfectly appropriate, for the boy's teacher, the boy's classmates, are for him, even if they have the best will in the world, Furies.

But in the Gluckian tragic structure every wall must be balanced by a plaint. The plaint in *Der Jasager* is the controlling pattern-unit of the first part of the tenth number. Over incessant repetitions of this figure, the teacher gives to the boy a formal and explicit reading of the law: one who gets sick on a mountain journey must be thrown into the valley; his companions must ask him if he wants them to abandon the journey and return home, on his account; and he must

answer, You shall not return. And the boy does indeed cry out, You shall not return. The two-bar musical figure underneath most of this lecture and response consists of two chordal suspensions that (in the case of the first appearance) might be understood as a kind of frustrated i-V half-cadence from A minor to E: in the first bar, a chord of the notes (reading from bottom up) A, D, and E, a 4-3 suspension over A--but for an instant the D dips down to C, producing a glimpse at exactly the sort of clear, root-position triad that this figure is never going to rest upon. The second bar consists of a static chord of the very widely spaced notes E, B, and A--a complicated version of yet another 4-3 suspension, this time over E. It would be easy to make this chord cadence solidly on E, but that is exactly what Weill didn't do; instead the figure keeps repeating itself, with various spread-out harmonies in the second bar. I speak of suspensions, but harmony suspended in such a manner is clearly never to going to fall: the sonority is cool, spare, detached, a set of pure acoustic objects generated from fifths. The figure is not an expression of pain but a hieroglyph of pain. Here is an isolated bit of naked expressivity--a succession of 4-3 suspensions that not only don't cadence, but that *mean* the absence of cadence, a state of permanent unhappy irresolution.

I think of this double-suspension figure as a freeze-dried lamentation. A lamentation is, by nature, expansive: overwhelming wretchedness wishes to expatiate on itself. But this is a clipped, truncated lamentation, a lamentation with little blood in it. The more the figure is repeated, the less pathetic it becomes: all semantics depend on systems of differentiation, and in the absence of a context any figure, no matter how potently charged, will become drained, a kind of fossil of meaning, or a pickled embryo presented coolly with forceps. (This is a potential danger with all musical hieroglyphs: it is impossible for any acoustic object to retain a steady significance, for the mere act of repetition tends to alter or remove the context that provided the meaning in the first place--the hope for a reliable dictionary of music-figures can never be fulfilled.) The double-suspension figure in *Der Jasager* is less a lamentation than a kind of semaphore for a lamentation that isn't taking place; a stand-in for an uncomplained complaint. The boy is not so self-indulgent as to protest his fate; so the music indicates what he might have said, but didn't. If musical tragedy tends to comprise a wall and a

plaint, this strange figure might be conceived as both wall and plaint in one: suitable both for the teacher's reading of the law, and for the boy's consent to it. It is the ideal hieroglyph of acquiescence: quietly implacable and coldly sad.

In Weill's American musical plays, we sometimes find similarly chilly figures, musical ghosts of figures that might have once been expressive. For example, the central character in *Lady in the Dark* (1941, with lyrics by Ira Gershwin) is Liza Elliott, a magazine editor who tells her analyst her fears of personal inadequacy; in a dream scene, set in a circus, she justifies her indecisiveness by singing "The Saga of Jenny," concerning a cheerful, self-indulgent woman who creates havoc by making quick decisions:

Jenny made her mind up at twenty-two
to get herself a husband was the thing to do.
She got herself all dolled up in her satins and furs
and she got herself a husband but he wasn't hers.

Poor Jenny, bright as a penny!

The choral refrain, "Poor Jenny, bright as a penny," is sung to a figure of mock lamentation--the term "poor" is obviously inappropriate for this brassy dame, but Weill's music is full of stylized sighs, organized around harmonic scrunches (produced by the simple means of stressing the seventh in dominant-seventh chords). One of the most remarkable features of Weill's whole career is the quality of musical irony in his later works, the way in which his ear remapped the stock figures of American popular music as elements of a sophisticated European semantics. The eighteenth-century satirist Jonathan Swift sometimes used a rhetorical figure that corresponds to irony in the same way that irony corresponds to normal speech: that is, he would say exactly what he meant, but in such a way that the reader would suspect that he meant something completely different--for instance, when he recommended that the Court should make virtuous conduct a matter of good manners, so that courtiers would behave honestly under the same pressure of etiquette that compelled them to use

the right fork at table. Weill, too, developed a manner of expressing what he believed in a way so literal that it's hard to take him seriously. I believe that "Poor Jenny" is, finally, less a mock lamentation than a mock mock lamentation, an expression of Weill's sense of the emptiness of the life of a rich amoral hedonist such as Jenny. This Jenny might be conceived as Pirate Jenny's great-granddaughter, a far more successful pirate, triumphantly rapacious. "The Saga of Jenny," like *Seeräuber-Jenny* but in a far lighter manner, exposes the desolation at the heart of her wishing. But this simple meaning is so feathered with a fringe of ironic possibilities that Weill evaded all responsibility for it.

Weill died in 1950, and Adorno, perhaps ashamed because he had once defended Weill's music, wrote a venomous obituary:

Weill considered himself a kind of Offenbach of his century, and, with respect to speed of social-aesthetic reaction and to sketchiness, the analogy is not unreasonable. But the model is not to be repeated. The horror of reality has become too overwhelming for a parody to reach up to it. . . . Indeed he had something of the genius of the great milliner. The capacity was given him to find the proper melodies for the year's display, and this completely transitory thing may last.¹²

We have seen that *The Threepenny Opera* is a story about clothes; so perhaps Adorno was in a sense right in conceiving Weill as a musical Chanel or Balenciaga. But I think of Weill as a composer who was able to put on any clothes--ranging from Protestant chorale to Jewish melisma to Euro-tango to Schoenbergian atonality to Richard Rodgers' popcorn--precisely because he was so confident that he had centered his art on the fundamentals of expression: on hieroglyphs. He was not a fake, but a serious composer adept at wearing any sort of frivolous musical drag. Perhaps the simplicity of *Der Jasager* is as much an artifice as any of his other styles, but I'm tempted to see it as the closest

approximation of Weill *in sich*, Weill without his dazzling polystylisms, Weill examining the basic tool-kit of his art: *Der Jasager* is music expression performed with flint axe and blade of horn, not much like such gorgeous, glossy devices as *The Threepenny Opera* and *Lady in the Dark*. And yet, even when Weill pretended to be Offenbach, or worse, his music relies on the old semantics as stated and refined by Monteverdi and other great figures. The sometimes fashionable cut of Weill's clothes masks the extraordinary historical force of his language--as responsive to the whole tradition of Western music as the language of Stravinsky or of Adorno's beloved Schoenberg. Weill, like Joyce in *Ulysses*, made his art a total art, by appropriating every resource that history provided: behind any of Weill's stage pieces there lies a nest of other stage pieces, opening out onto everything from *The Play of Daniel* to Rodgers' *Carousel*. To learn what is the common property of all music theatre, listen to Weill.

In chapter 21 of Mann's *Dr. Faustus*--so profoundly informed by the aesthetics of Adorno--the composer-hero opines:

"The work of art! It's deceit. It's the sort of thing the bourgeois would like to see still existing. It opposes truth, opposes seriousness. Only the very short thing, the highly consistent musical instant, is valid and serious. . . . Today semblance and play [*Schein und Spiel*] have the conscience of art against them. Art wants to stop being semblance and play, it wants to become knowledge [*Erkenntnis*]."

. . . how will art live as knowledge? I remembered what he had

written . . . about the expansion of the kingdom of the banal.¹³

Many versions of Weill's life are told from this Faustian point of view: Weill sold out fame, for money, through relentless expansion of the kingdom of the banal. But Weill faced the same dilemma that Schoenberg and Webern and Mann's Leverkühn faced: after one had concentrated one's art to the limits of sobriety, without development or fancifulness of any sort, what did one do next? That didactic masterpiece, *Der Jasager*, shows a musical art that has stopped being pretense and play, and has aspired to become knowledge. But the world cannot subsist on professorial lessons alone; and it is a testament to Weill's richness of imagination that he could use every resource of musical art, from Bach to the most meretricious *chanson*, to convey his strangely urgent critiques of expression. Leverkühn, of course, really did sell his soul to the devil; but Weill did something far more modern, far more radical: he sold his soul to Broadway.

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1. Jean Cocteau, *Le Coq et l'arlequin*, p. 11: "Le tact dans l'audace, c'est de savoir *jusqu'où on peut aller trop loin*."

2. T. S. Eliot, "London Letter," *The Dial*, Sept. 1921

3. Igor Stravinsky, *Themes and Conclusions*, p. 33

4. Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, p. 178

5. After reading Hans Eichner's review of *Der Erwählte*, Mann complained: "ich muss mich ganz und gar verschrieben haben, wenn auch nicht dieses Buch mein Grundverhältnis zum Sein und zum Leben ausdrückte: Sympathie. Ich habe die Menschen nie zu verwirren gesucht, aber habe gesucht, sie zu befriedigen, zu trösten_-zu erheitern. Erheiterung tut ihnen gut, sie löst den Hass und die Dummheit, so bringe ich sie gern zum Lachen. Das ist kein nihilistisches Lachen, dass ich bringe, kein Hohngelächter. . . . Nehmen Sie das Ding als was es ist: ein ganz lustiges

und nicht gedankenloses Experiment. Es hat viele Menschen für ein Paar Stunden glücklich gemacht. Das ist auch etwas. . . . (from Eberhardt Hilscher, *Thomas Mann, Leben und Werke*, p. 194)

6. Mann, *The Letters of Thomas Mann*, vol. 2, p. 546

7. Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, p. 135

8. Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 15, p. 474

9. Kurt Weill, cited by Kim Kowalke, *The Opera Quarterly* 6.3 (Spring 1989): 30

10. Weill, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, p. 68

11. Weill, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, pp. 68-69

12. *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 15 April 1950. For a fine discussion of this obituary, see David Drew's article in *A New Orpheus*, ed. Kowalke.

13. Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, p. 181