

## Brecht's and Weill's Views of Mahagonny: Musical-Textual Tensions

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In his famous essay "Anmerkungen zur Oper *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*" Brecht clearly delineates his conception of Epic Opera in general and of his and Kurt Weill's opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* in particular: "Der Einbruch der Methoden des epischen Theaters in die Oper führt hauptsächlich zu einer radikalen *Trennung der Elemente*. Der grosse Primatkampf zwischen Wort, Musik und Darstellung...kann einfach beigelegt werden durch die radikale Trennung der Elemente... *Musik, Wort und Bild mußten mehr Selbständigkeit erhalten*."<sup>1</sup> Brecht continues with a list of differences in emphasis between what he calls "dramatic opera" and "epic opera." In the former the music intensifies and *dominates* the text, whereas in the latter it *interprets* and *presupposes* the text as its starting point:

*Dramatische Oper*  
Die Musik serviert  
Musik den Text steigend  
Musik den Text behauptend  
Musik illustrierend  
Musik die psychische Situation malend

*Epische Oper*  
Die Musik vermittelt  
den Text auslegend  
den Text voraussetzend  
Stellung nehmend  
das Verhalten gebend<sup>2</sup>

Compare these remarks with Kurt Weill's commentary on the same opera in the forward to the production book written in 1930. After observing that the *Dreigroschenoper* was a "dialogue opera" or "mixed genre" made up of theater and opera because of the necessity of advancing the plot between the songs and musical interludes, he states unambiguously that *Mahagonny* was composed and structured according to *purely musical principles*: "Der Stoff der Oper *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* ermöglichte eine *Gestaltung nach rein musikalischen Gesetzen*."<sup>3</sup> Weill further emphasizes the predominant role of the *music* in this opera:

Die schauspielerische Führung der Sänger, die Bewegung des Chors, wie überhaupt der ganze Darstellungsstil dieser Oper, werden bestimmt durch den Stil der Musik... Die Haltung des Menschen ist in der Musik bereits so fixiert, dass eine einfache natürliche Interpretation der Musik schon den Darstellungsstil angibt... Bei der Inszenierung der Oper muß stets berücksichtigt werden, dass hier *abgeschlossene musikalische Formen* vorliegen. Es besteht also eine *wesentliche Aufgabe* darin, den rein musikalischen Ablauf zu sichern und die Darsteller so zu gruppieren, dass ein *beinahe konzertantes* Musizieren möglich ist.<sup>4</sup>





## Example 1.

Weill *RISE AND FALL OF THE CITY OF MAHAGONNY*  
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The fugue begins with the subject in the key of E flat minor (including the dominant seventh of E flat in measures 1-3), and, as in many Baroque fugues, initially *seems* to modulate to the dominant B flat minor for the second entrance, but instead the subject now enters in the *subdominant* A flat minor (again initiated by the dominant seventh of A flat). Not even this key becomes firmly established, however. Through a series of dissonances Weill now leads us to the dominant of A minor, so that the *third* entrance of the fugue subject begins (by a leap of a fourth) *not* in the expected E flat minor (i.e., a return to the tonic in bars four and five of the first entrance), but rather on the dominant of D minor, an interval of a tritone from the second entrance of the subject and a major seventh from the first entrance! In just 20 agitated, *molto vivace* bars we are transported to a key, which according to the harmonic relationships of conventional fugal composition is about as far removed as possible from the original key. The fourth and fifth entrances are both in the mediant G major, a major third above the first entrance. After the intervening chorus, the sixth, seventh and eighth entrances of the subject harmonically repeat entrances three, four and five:

## Key of Fugue subject

(based on the fourth and fifth bar of each entrance)

1. Bar 1: E flat minor
  2. Bar 9: A flat minor
  3. Bar 20: D minor
  4. Bar 31: G major
  5. Bar 39: G major
- [chorus]
6. Bar 120: D minor
  7. Bar 131: G major
  8. Bar 139: G major

As so often in Weill's collaboration with Brecht, the music itself disorients the listener and contributes to the alienation effect, which both writer and composer were striving to create in their "epic" opera.

In the 81 bars between the fifth and sixth entrances of the subject, Jenny Smith, Leokadia Begbick, Fatty, Trinity Moses, the six girls, and the male chorus sing the following lines as the hurricane approaches Mahagonny:

Oh furchtbares Ereignis,  
Die Stadt der Freude wird zerstört.  
Auf den Bergen stehen die Hurrikane  
Und der Tod tritt aus den Wassern hervor.  
Oh furchtbares Ereignis,  
Oh grausames Geschick!  
Wo ist eine Mauer, die mich verbirgt?  
Wo ist eine Höhle, die mich aufnimmt?  
Oh furchtbares Ereignis,  
Oh grausames Geschick!

The chorus in this number mimics that of ancient Greek drama as well as Baroque opera, where man's destiny is predetermined and controlled by fate. At the end of this number the agitated fugue ends with a crescendo to a double *forte*. In contrast, the following Number 11, the night of the hurricane, begins with the male chorus very softly (*piano*) and slowly (*largo*) singing the following words in 4/4 time:

Halte! euch aufrecht, fürchtet euch nicht,  
Brüder, erlischt auch das irdische Licht  
Wollet nicht verzagen  
Was hilft alles Klagen  
Dem, der gegen Hurikane ficht.<sup>8</sup>

(Here Brecht's use of phrases such as "wollet nicht verzagen" and "was hilft alles Klagen" is reminiscent of German Baroque poetry by writers such as Paul Fleming and Andreas Gryphius.) This is followed by



a musical-verbal "battle" between the male chorus and the other characters (led by Jim Mahoney), who sing ever louder and more defiantly as the chorus keeps softly repeating the words just cited. When they learn that the hurricane has destroyed Pensacola, Widow Begbick breaks out triumphantly (singing *forte* and then double *forte* on the third syllable of "Pensacola") since she is sure the sheriffs who were pursuing her for her crimes are dead; meanwhile Jim Mahoney, singing *forte*, continues encouraging everyone to engage in and enjoy all those things (such as loud singing!) that Leokadia Begbick has forbidden. His reasoning is compelling and seductive: since the hurricane does not obey any human rules and will presumably soon destroy them, they may as well "seize the moment," shed all inhibitions, and disregard all moral, ethical, and societal constraints in the meantime.

At this point Weill introduces a humorous touch: the male chorus, which had been softly repeating its words of steadfast encouragement in the face of unavoidable fate, and which now, singing close behind the wall, is exasperated with the boisterousness of the others, matches their *forte* as it *shouts* out the words: "Seid ruhig! Seid ruhig!" These exhortations alternate with the "Also singt mit uns!" of Jim, Jenny, Fatty, Moses, Jakob, Bill and Joe. For a while the rowdy group completely drowns out the male chorus as it reaches a double *forte* and ends with the words that epitomize Jimmy Mahoney's newly found "rules of human happiness:"

Denn wie man sich bettet, so liegt man  
Es deckt einen keiner da zu  
und wenn einer tritt, dann bin ich es,  
Und wird einer getreten, dann bist's du!<sup>9</sup>

As the lights go out, the double *forte* suddenly changes to a *pianissimo*, and the violins' repeated glissando-like chromatic sequence played above the changing harmonies in the bass eerily depicts the sounds of the approaching hurricane. The chorus, now far in the distance, repeats its exhortations and the curtain slowly falls to end Act I.

With regard to Brecht's remarks on epic theater and opera, the manner in which Act I ends raises intriguing questions: Why does this act end with Number 11, leaving the audience in suspense as to the approaching hurricane and likely physical destruction of Mahagonny? Is this not "Spannung auf den Ausgang," which Brecht attributes in his "Anmerkungen zur Oper *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*" to the dramatic rather than the epic form of theater? Brecht's text, like most of his other theatrical works, is a series of scenes, or "Bilder" (the "Numbers" of the opera) and is not divided into acts.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to what we would expect, based on Brecht's theory of epic theater, there is no projection or sign at the beginning of the hurricane scenes (Numbers 10 and 11 at the end of Act I and

Number 12 at the beginning of Act II) informing the audience that Mahagonny will be spared the total devastation that the hurricane causes in Pensacola and Atsena. If the audience were informed of the outcome in advance, what would be the motivation for Jim Mahoney's proclamation "Du darfst es!" and the willingness of Begbick and the others to follow him? Particularly in the setting of these scenes it appears that Weill's concept of musical unity rather than Brecht's theory of the "separation of the elements" is the dominating factor. In Number 12, which begins the second act, the reports over the loudspeaker on the increasing velocity and destruction of the approaching hurricane keep the *audience* as well as the people in Mahagonny keyed up to a fever pitch of anticipation and uncertainty about the outcome. Only toward the end of this number do the audience and the Mahagonnians learn that the city has been spared. It also seems strange that Act I ends before rather than after the loudspeaker announcement that "Der Hurrikan hat um die Stadt Mahagonny einen Bogen gemacht und setzt seinen Weg fort."<sup>11</sup> Would the words "O wunderbare Lösung!" at the end of Number 12 not have been a more logical point for Act I to end? In that case Act II would begin with Jakob's eating scene, followed by the love-making, boxing and drinking scenes.

Another example of Weill's musical treatment of Brecht's text occurs in Number 13 in Act II in which Jakob Schmidt gorges himself to death to the accompaniment of a slow waltz melody (*Valse lento*) played on a zither and bandoneon onstage. Except for a few dissonances, this accompaniment is reminiscent of certain passages in the piano waltzes of Frederic Chopin.<sup>12</sup>

The romanticism and sentimentality of this accompaniment stands in stark contrast to the uncanny, grotesque quality of both the text and the visual image presented on the stage: we literally see Jakob die of over-consumption in this "culinary opera." At this point the music shifts abruptly to a mock-solemn funeral chorus sung by the men of Mahagonny as they stand in a half-circle behind Jakob's bloated corpse and remove their hats:

Sehet, Schmidt ist gestorben!  
Sehet, welch ein glückseliger  
Ausdruck auf seinem Gesicht ist!  
Weil er sich gefüllt hat  
Weil er nicht beendet hat  
Ein Mann ohne Furcht!

The discrepancy between the music on the one hand and the text and staging on the other creates a sense of irony and contributes to the alienation effect throughout this scene.





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David Drew, *Kurt Weill: A Handbook* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), p. 177.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.42.

<sup>12</sup> Weill and Brecht, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, pp. 166-168.

<sup>13</sup> Kim Kowalke, *Kurt Weill in Europe 1900-1935* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Research Press, 1979), p. 147.