

Kurt Weill - Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny (2012)



1. Act I 2. Act II 3. Act III Elisabeth Kulman - Leokadja Begbick Tomasz Konieczny - Dreieinigkeitsmoses Angelika Kirchschrager - Jenny Hill Christopher Ventris - Jim Mahoney Herwig Pecoraro - Fatty Norbert Ernst - Jack O'Brien Clemens Unterreiner - Bill Il Hong - Joe Wolfram Igor Derntl - Bobby Higgins Ileana Tonca - Mädchen 1 Valentina Naornita - Mädchen 2 Ildikó Raimondi - Mädchen 3 Juliette Mars - Mädchen 4 Stephanie Houtzeel - Mädchen 5 Monika Bohinec - Mädchen 6 Heinz Zednik – Kommentator Chor und Orchester der Wiener Staatsoper Ingo Metzmaker – conductor Wiener Staatsoper Januar 2012

A collaboration between composer Kurt Weill and librettist Bertolt Brecht, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* conveys the sense of alienation and disillusionment that characterized the interwar period in Germany, and stands as a harrowing example of the darkly apocalyptic wit of its creators. Though its musical materials -- which borrow freely from jazz and cabaret styles -- demonstrate a palpable sense of parody, Weill was careful to note that irony should not be read into the piece itself, but observed firsthand in the kind of world the piece portrays. "It is not advisable to shift presentation of the work to the side of the ironic or the grotesque," Weill pointed out in the foreword to the production book. "Since the incidents are not symbolic but typical, economy in the scenic means and in the expression of the individual actor commends itself most strongly." It is the directness, the eerie familiarity of the sights and sounds, that lend the piece its power. As philosopher and critic T.W. Adorno observed in 1931, Weill's music demonstrates "a circumspect sharpness which by means of its leaps and sidesteps makes articulate something which the song public would prefer not to know about."

Set rather tenuously in the United States (according to a surreal geography, somewhere between Pensacola and the Gold Coast), the story follows a group of fugitive criminals who set up a resort town in hopes of attracting newly rich customers returning with full pockets from the Gold Rush. Among those who arrive are a group of young girls in search of whisky, men, and money. Their carnal desires alternate with nostalgic lyricism in the famous Alabama Song. The awkward dissonances and clunky melodies of the verses are so overshadowed by the wistfully

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arching line of the chorus that the real dramatic intention of this popular song is perhaps lost on many listeners, who likely never hear it in context or in its entirety. Other visitors to the town include a group of men returning from seven years' labor in Alaska, eager to spend their hard-earned cash on Mahagonny's pleasures -- which include the girls, who have found employment of the most ancient kind in this city of sin. A romance develops between Jimmy and Jenny, though this relationship is like every other interpersonal exchange in Mahagonny: sentiments seem to fall on half-deaf ears, the characters talk past each other. There is a sense that everyone on-stage is oblivious to everyone else, except when self interest prompts interaction -- a disjunction that finds voice in Weill's dialectical juxtapositions of musical materials. In the end, several of the men suffer ignominious demises (one eats so much he dies, another is executed for his inability to pay a bar tab), the citizens divide into arbitrarily opposing political factions, and God himself condemns the residents to hell. They refuse to go, however, insisting that hell can be no worse than Mahagonny. ---Jeremy Grimshaw, Rovi

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