

THE MUSICIAN WEILL

(*Der Musiker Weill*, 1928)

Stand up! Sit down! Stand up! Sit down! Stand up! Sit down!

We talked in our last class about the transformation of opera into music drama, and I explained to you the concept of the total work of art. I'll write these names on the board once more, so no one will have an excuse:

Richard Wagner

" Strauss.

Now we come to a new subject. You will recall that I read to you from Wagner's texts. They were all about gods and heroes and notable topics like forest murmurs, magic fire, knights of the grail, etc., which seemed quite strange to you. And there were difficult thought processes that you couldn't follow, and other things that you still don't understand and that still don't seem relevant to you. You just weren't interested in them. You would rather occupy yourselves with technology, airplanes, autos, radios, bridge building; and the lectures you prefer are the sports news.

Write this down! The age of gods and heroes is past.

I also played for you the music of Wagner and his followers. You saw that it had so many notes that I couldn't play them all. You tried to sing along with the melody, but it didn't work. You sensed that this music was soporific or intoxicating, affecting you like alcohol or other drugs. But you didn't want to go to sleep, you wanted to hear music that you could understand without explanation, that you could readily absorb with tunes that you could quickly learn. Apparently you're not aware that your parents sometimes go to concerts. This is a custom that came from the social conditions of the preceding century, conditions that are irrelevant to your generation. There are again today great issues that are of concern to everyone, and if music cannot be placed in the service of the general public then it has lost its reason for being.

Write this down! Music is no longer something for the few.

Modern musicians have taken this sentence to heart. Their music is simpler, clearer, and more transparent. They no longer wish it to embody a philosophy, depict external processes, or produce certain moods, but they still want it to fulfill its original purpose and have its original meaning. Look at it this way: When musicians had achieved everything in their greatest of dreams, then they began again from scratch.

Write this down! Kurt Weill is attempting to begin from scratch in the area of musical theater.

He has realized that opera can no longer continue as in its romantic manifestation, divorced from the atmosphere of the present. He wants opera that will conform to the trends in theater of the day, opera characters who are again living people

speaking a language understood by everyone. For this reason he has joined up with the theatrical movement that most strictly fulfills the artistic demands of our time—the one founded by Bertolt Brecht—open parenthesis—Bertolt Brecht, the founder of epic drama—close parenthesis. Weill recognized in this movement a richness of new and astonishing challenges for the musician. Brecht and Weill have investigated the question of music's role in theater. They have concluded that music cannot further the action of a play or create its background. Instead, it achieves its proper value when it interrupts the action at the right moments.

Write down the term "gestic character of music"—it is the most important outcome of Weill's work so far. We'll talk about it in detail in the specialized course next year, when those of you who want to be critics have left us.

Stand up! Let's sing No. 16:

Der Mensch lebt durch den Kopf, der Kopf reicht ihm nicht aus, ver -
such' es nur, von dei - nem Kopf lebt hoech - stens ei - ne Maus.

[Man lives off of his head, but his head isn't enough. Just try it; all that could live off your head is a mouse!]²

Notes

[Text: Weill, "Der Musiker Kurt Weill," *Berliner Tageblatt*, 25 December 1928. Translated by Bryan R. Simms.]

- [1. Weill elaborates upon his notion of a "gestic" character in his music in an article, "Die gestische Charakter der Musik," *Die Musik* 21 (March 1929). He says that the term refers to a musical style that could represent and establish the personal relations among the characters in a play, a style that was close in both rhythm and sense to the texts that the characters sing and that was capable of making the meaning of the drama crystal clear.]
- [2. This is the first verse of Peachum's "Das Lied von der Unzulänglichkeit," from Weill's *Die Dreigroschenoper* (The Threepenny Opera). There the last word is "louse," not "mouse."]