

“Mahagonny” and its implications

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"I also believe that, with a work like Mahagonny, we should not have the usual kind of premiere because in many cases a premiere at a Berlin opera house has proven very risky, and it would be similarly dangerous to direct the interest of the entire German press to a performance in the provinces." Kurt Weill to Emil Hertzka, 2 August 1929

The decade following the end of the First World War was marked by immense social change which also had a major impact on cultural life. In 1927, an essay by Kurt Weill was published in which he writes about “shifts in

musical composition”, which he viewed as the necessary consequence of the restructuring of audiences. Weill’s demands went far beyond the changes in musical concepts. They were equally concerned with the manner and conditions in which new works were to be presented to the public.

The letters exchanged between Weill, Emil Hertzka and Hans Heinsheimer, excerpts of which are printed below, reveal how they struggled to find a suitable location for the first performance of *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. The premiere finally took place on 9 March 1930 in Leipzig; it was one of the biggest theatre scandals of the century. Against the backdrop of the looming economic crisis and disturbed by riots orchestrated by the National Socialists, the performance toyed with reality in a manifest game of deception.

The repercussions of the Leipzig premiere proved decisive for the fate of *Mahagonny*, but this was not because the work’s unprecedented nature and musical quality were acclaimed by critics and audience alike, nor was it due to the high aspirations of the Leipzig production. The critical factors were in fact the disruption organised by the National Socialists and right-wing attempts to get the production banned on political grounds, first on 10 March by appealing to the theatre committee of Leipzig city council and then in a city council meeting on 14 March.

This is what was reported in the press throughout Germany. The numerous follow-up performances that had been anticipated by Weill and UE, and for which contracts had already been concluded in some cases, were postponed or cancelled until only Kassel, Braunschweig and Frankfurt am Main remained. Even locations such as the opera house in Essen, which had shown avid enthusiasm before the premiere, now shelved their plans. By May, private (Volksbühne) events were being considered and some of these even went ahead. Weill and Heinsheimer had the highest hopes for the Frankfurt premiere on 17 October. However, enthusiastic telegrams and positive reactions from the audience and in the press were again followed by radical right-wing disturbances. A production of *Mahagonny* in Berlin began to seem a more remote prospect than ever before. Although the Kroll Opera again showed interest at the beginning of the year, the prospect of a performance at a private theatre seemed much more attractive to Weill. The hesitant, apprehensive attitude of the opera houses, which were dependent on the agreement of the city authorities and government, on the one hand, and the increasing success of commercial entertainment theatre on the other, turned Weill’s attention in a direction that would be crucial for his development.

*The repercussions of the Leipzig premiere proved decisive
for the fate of “Mahagonny”.*

Weill to Hertzka, 13 July 1929

The Mahagonny business has now taken a very surprising turn. After I played Klemperer the 3rd act, I departed. Legal (ed.: Ernst Legal; Head of the Kroll Opera and director; 1881–1955), who was greatly impressed, categorically demanded immediate acceptance of the work. Klemperer declared that he was essentially in agreement. 2 hours later, Klemperer phoned me at my home and said that he wanted to come over immediately. When he arrived, he was at his wits' end and with tears in his eyes he explained that he had wrestled with himself for 2 hours, but it just wasn't going to be possible. He claimed to recognise the importance of it all and remarked that he could see the musical beauty, but the whole thing was foreign and incomprehensible to him. He nevertheless thought that he might be won over if he were to see the work performed and suggested that we should premiere the opera in the provinces at the earliest opportunity, saying that he would then undertake to perform it if it convinced him. I did not explore this suggestion any further.

And so this leaves us with the following question: should we give Mahagonny to the Kroll even if Klemperer does not conduct it? I believe we can definitely answer in the affirmative, as long as Legal appoints a conductor chosen by me. They have also already agreed to that possibility.

Hertzka to Weill, 18 July 1929

Your letter dated the 13th only arrived here on the 16th and was actually quite a surprise. We cannot interfere in the Klemperer-Legal conflict and I am against giving Mahagonny to the Kroll. I would consider it absolutely misguided to allow a different conductor to perform Mahagonny at the Kroll. The Kroll is currently characterised both inwardly and outwardly by Klemperer and not Legal. Herr Legal's exasperated comment to the contrary does nothing to change this fact and I believe that you will understand my point perfectly and that we will now erase the Kroll from our choices.

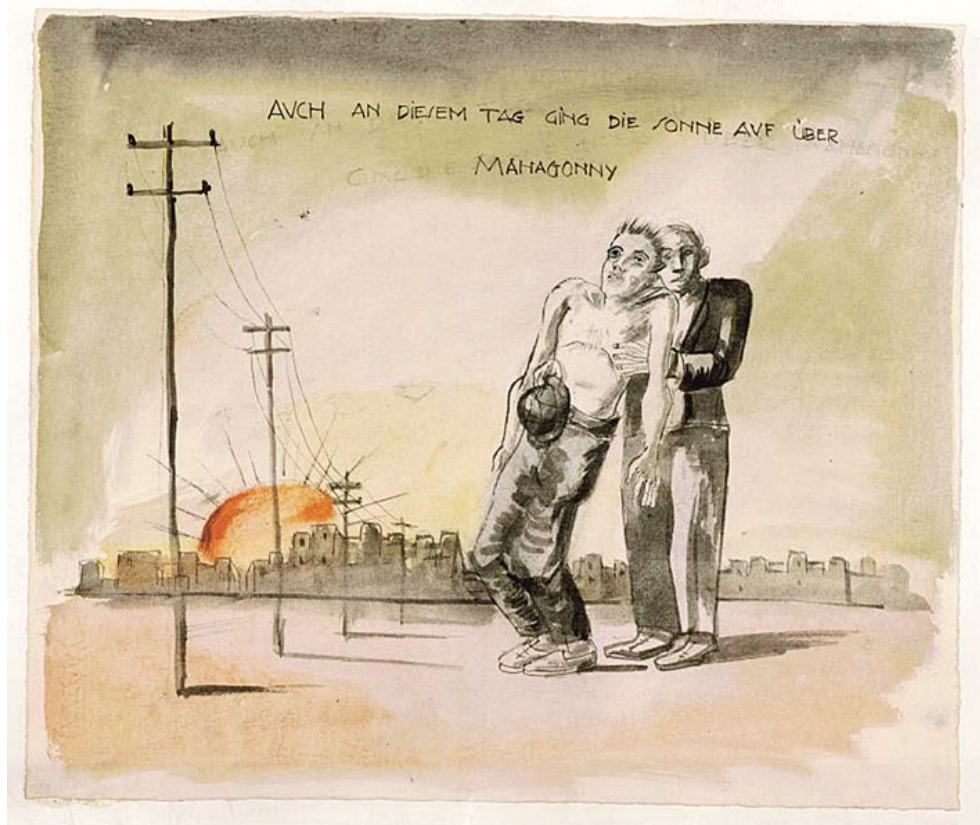
Weill to Hertzka, 22 July 1929

My dear Director Hertzka, I would like to thank you for your letter and also

inform you of how the Mahagonny business has progressed. Tietjen (ed.: Heinz Tietjen; Artistic Director of the Kroll; 1881–1967) has become acquainted with the work and, as Curjel (ed.: Hans Curjel, conductor; 1896–1974) and Legal have confirmed, “has emphasised that he has gained a good impression of both the music and the text, and he believes that the work will be a success”. However, he does not have the courage to either accept it or reject it, and has therefore proposed that we postpone the matter until September. He is certainly being put under pressure by his superiors, and it seems that tactical considerations which have nothing to do with my work itself are also playing a major role. Despite all this, it is Klemperer who is wholly to blame for the situation.

Hertzka to Weill, 24 July 1929

It is at any rate good to hear that Tietjen also responded positively to the work. This is not of any further importance to us at present, however. We shall resolve the matter of the premiere without Berlin, and perhaps consider Frankfurt, Essen or Breslau instead. Perhaps Leipzig would be another possibility, as long as we can accept a later date. I would personally prefer Leipzig to Breslau, but Leipzig already has Boris Godunov as its first new production, which is being planned for the 2nd half of October. In December there will be a major new Offenbach work, in January The Life of Orestes and in February probably Marienlegende by Dressel (all of which are from our publishing house). Considering the fact that Boris is already being rehearsed and the Offenbach is a true carnival novelty, I fear that it would hardly be feasible to fit in Mahagonny before the Krenek premiere. However, it would at least be possible to perform Mahagonny in Leipzig after Orestes, i.e. in the 2nd half of February, and to postpone Dressel. If you could accept a later date, I could ask Brecher about this at his holiday resort. I have suggested Leipzig mainly because the Threepenny Opera ran for the longest there, after Berlin and Vienna.



Projection displays by Caspar Neher for the premiere of "Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny"

Hertzka to Weill, 1 August 1929

I was pleased to read in the newspapers that your Lindbergh Cantata was hugely successful and, as it seems, was the highlight of Baden-Baden. (□) And now to Mahagonny. Dr Heinsheimer has written to me about the idea of offering the premiere to the first comer and although in principle I am absolutely in favour of the idea that several theatres should prepare the first performance concurrently, albeit not necessarily perform it on the same evening, I also believe that the envisaged number is exaggerated and I would be happiest with about 4 theatres, all of which should be as far away from one another as possible. There should, however, be at least one large theatre and 3 small ones. The rehearsals and first performance in the large theatre must be attended by you and Brecht, while in the smaller theatres the work and responsibilities can be left to the stage directors, although the latter should be tested for their suitability at the outset. Should any changes become necessary or be considered more practical during the final rehearsals, it will then be easy to implement them at the other theatres.

Weill to Hertzka, 2 August 1929

While in Baden-Baden I had the opportunity to discuss the whole Mahagonny issue with Dr Heinsheimer and continue the thoughts proposed by you. Dr Heinsheimer has informed you about the details of our conversation and I

would just like to add that I am entirely in agreement with Dr Heinsheimer's suggestions, which also correspond to yours. I also believe that, with a work like Mahagonny, we should not have the usual kind of premiere because in many cases a premiere at a Berlin opera house has proven very risky, and it would be similarly dangerous to direct the interest of the entire German press to a performance in the provinces. It therefore seems most plausible to exploit the extraordinary interest in Mahagonny by arranging for performance in a number of theatres and to allow these theatres to premiere the work on one particular day (e.g. 31 Dec.). I am also completely in agreement with you that there must be at least one major theatre and I believe that Leipzig would be best because the Threepenny Opera had such a huge impact there.

Heinsheimer to Weill, 10 August 1929

The letter written to you by Director Hertzka has clarified the Mahagonny issue and we should now begin work as soon as possible. We would now like to complete both the piano score and the libretto very quickly because we need material for perusal in order to have a serious chance of interesting a larger number of theatres in the work. I hope it will not be long before you send the second act of Mahagonny as announced. We will then correct the libretto according to the corrections made to the text in the second act and send it to be typeset straight away. The engraving of the first act of the piano score will be finished in the course of next week and you will receive the corrections immediately; we would be grateful if you could process these corrections most rapidly. In the meantime, we will continue to work at full speed on the 2nd and 3rd acts. This will hopefully enable us to produce several trial copies of the piano score and the libretto for the most important theatres before the end of the month. Incidentally, at present it seems that nobody involved in the theatres has returned from their vacations yet, which means we really do have until the end of the month. You are aware that we are taking the whole Mahagonny affair tremendously seriously, and considering the fact that Director Hertzka essentially approves of all that we discussed in Baden-Baden (he has written to me about this again today), the work will now go ahead with particular energy and, although I hardly need to assure you of this, with special care.

Weill to UE, 12 August 1929

I am very pleased that Mahagonny is now going ahead as planned and I hope that in about a month we will be able to see how things are going. By the way, the text in the libretto will have to be printed with a completely different layout than in your typewritten manuscript. Most of it has to be printed in verses, so Brecht and I will have to rework the libretto to account for this.



Projection displays by Caspar Neher for the premiere of "Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny"

Express letter from Heinsheimer to Weill, 27 August 1929

Brecher has just phoned and we have discussed the whole question of Mahagonny at length and come to a final decision. First of all, you will be pleased to hear that Brecher is very impressed with the second act and responded with unequivocal support. He will receive the third act this evening.

Now the matter of the dates: after rethinking matters carefully, Brecher cannot keep to the November date, particularly in consideration of the orchestra's upcoming trip to Paris. Following detailed discussions on the phone, it has become clear that the only possible date on offer is the 9th of March, which is a Sunday. The dress rehearsal would be on Saturday, the 8th of March. He would definitely keep to this date, come what may, and he is willing to sign the contract straight away.

I told him on the phone yesterday that I consider this March date early enough, considering our special plans for Mahagonny. I can also report that Director Hertzka entirely approves of this view and he agrees that we can finalise arrangements with Leipzig to perform the work on 9 March 1930.

Weill to UE, 1 December 1929

Please find attached the requested article for your Anbruch journal. I am happy to have found a different form than the usual essay. Please print the following preliminary note in small letters below the headline: Kurt Weill is

working with Caspar Neher and Bert Brecht on a production book for the opera Mahagonny which contains precise suggestions for the scenic performance of the work and which will be presented to the theatres together with the musical performance material and Neher's projection displays. The main elements of the preface are given below.

Heinsheimer to Weill, 4 March 1930

Director Hertzka thanks you for your cordial greetings and is also pleased that the preparations for Mahagonny are continuing with such success. He is unfortunately still in bed owing to a heavy cold and was forced to postpone his departure to Berlin, which was planned for today. He sincerely hopes that he will be able to travel again by the end of the week, but must unfortunately warn you that these circumstances mean that it is doubtful whether he will be able to attend the premiere in Leipzig. I will arrive in Leipzig on Saturday morning at the latest.

Hertzka to Weill, 5 March 1930

As my office has already informed you, I have been ill for several days with a heavy cold and it unfortunately seems that, as I will not even be able to leave the house and go to the office either today or tomorrow, it will be impossible for me to be well enough again to travel to the premiere. You will know how sorry I am to be missing this premiere that is so important to us all.

Dr Heinsheimer will also pass on my greetings and warmest wishes in person. You can be sure I will be crossing my fingers as hard as I can on Sunday. I hope that I will be able to see a repeat performance of Mahagonny in Leipzig or somewhere else very soon and would like to send you and Frau Lenja my most heartfelt greetings.

Weill to UE, 20 March 1930

Thank you ever so much for your recent letter. I am very pleased that they have been swift in dealing with the propaganda regarding Mahagonny. What do you think about the idea of adding an insert to the brochure to respond to the Leipzig scandal? It would similarly be a series of newspaper articles and would enable us to completely isolate the Leipziger Neueste Nachrichten and the few nationalist papers which have also advocated censorship of the work. At the same time, and very importantly, it would make it clear to the theatre managers that this was nothing more than the organised machinations of right-wing radicals (as clearly exemplified in Braunschweig).

In the meantime, it has come indirectly to my attention that in Essen and Dortmund they are considering postponing Mahagonny "indefinitely". We must use all the means at our disposal to dissuade them from this idea. It is clearly the result of intrigues sparked in and around the Centre Party which, if

not countered, could grow over the long term to severely damage not just this particular work, but all works for modern theatre. I would therefore ask you to use all the legal means available to you (contractual penalties, compensation) to ensure that the performances will definitely go ahead. The current version of the work is such that even a Catholic audience would not be perturbed by it, so for anyone to attempt to prevent the performance without having ever seen this version, as is already happening, is purely the result of blind prejudice.

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