“Off to Mahagonny”

Kim Kowalke

Kim Kowalke, President of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music in New York

In the second part of the interview, Kim Kowalke, who is president of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music in New York, explains the issues important to him in putting the opera together. Since Weill left no definitive version, there are many questions which can only be answered with the help of profound knowledge of Mahagonny’s performance history.

Although every opera presents issues in production, “Mahagonny” may be one of the most challenging to tackle. Recently UE created a new set of corrected score and orchestra parts that include appendices and alternative and optional

inserts. What problems have been addressed with the new materials?

Kowalke: This isn't a critical edition of the opera; that's still a daunting future project for the Kurt Weill Edition. But in the interim we wanted to have something that would give conductors and directors the materials necessary to make informed choices as they assemble their productions of Mahagonny. There is no one definitive version of Mahagonny, and there will probably never be two productions that present exactly the same musical text because there are too many choices to be made, too many options. Which Havanna Lied do you use? The one Weill wrote in 1931 for Lenya for the Berlin production, which is the more famous one now, or the original setting, which is less "songlike" and more neo-classical, even Hindemithian, in style. Do you include the Crane Duet, which was originally a substitute for part of the brothel scene that the censors wouldn't allow to be performed in 1930? Nowadays, if you do that scene in Act II as originally written, what do you do with the Crane Duet? Does it go into Act III, where David Drew situates it in his 1969 revised vocal score, or perhaps in Act I near the beginning of the relationship of Jenny and Jimmy, between Nos. 7 and 8. And there may be other places where it could work. Weill himself talked about the "loose" structure of his number-opera, and the inclusion/placement of the "Crane Duet" is a good illustration of this. It's been performed successfully with dramaturgical impact in all three acts at one time or another.

Then, if you do decide to include the Crane Duet, which is very much neo-classical in style, should it be paired with the original Havanna Lied in similar style, or do you want to contrast it with the revised one? If you're going to include both of the borrowings from the Songspiel, the Benares Song and God in Mahagonny, where should they go and what dramaturgical function are they going to serve? Although the opera was conceived in three acts, today most productions opt to perform it in two, with a single intermission. If you do it in three acts, do you put Jimmy's aria Nur die Nacht at the end of Act Two, which is where it was originally, or do you move it to the beginning of Act Three, where Weill placed it, I think, for the second production, the one in Kassel. Such choices initiate something of a domino effect that necessitates mixing and matching transitions and act endings. So in the new materials, we present all of these options, along with all of the known authorised cuts in various musical numbers that were performed in the first productions. We invite conductors and directors to make informed decisions that fit their circumstances and their concept for the production. I've just written a very concise summary of the various options, and this will be distributed with the materials so that conductors and directors will have an easier time making these choices. And once the choices have been made, the orchestral materials will be able to accommodate them, without scrambling to order additional

materials from the publisher.

Another crucial decision that conductors have to make is what size string section to use. In Weill's holograph full score he included numbers next to the violin, viola, cello, and bass staves, respectively, 6-3-2-2. We don't know when he wrote the numerals, we don't know if the numbers refer to players or stands, and we don't know if these represent minimums for a small theatre like the Berlin production, where the pit size would have been very constricted, or whether he meant something else entirely. I did ask Maurice Abravanel, who conducted the production in Kassel. Weill went there for final rehearsals, and because Abravanel had been his pupil in Berlin, I figured Weill would have told him what he wanted. Abravanel said "Of course, we used the full orchestra, the full string section. We were in an opera house, and Weill said 'yes, that's right'." I've heard it done with just six violins in several large houses, and it didn't work at all. With the sizeable brass and wind sections, the strings could have just as well stayed home for much of the piece. And in the exposed passages, such as the hurricane scene, there was no presence to the string sound. If you're in a 3000-seat house, you can't do this piece with six violins. I think, again, you have to look at the individual circumstances and find the right size string section to balance everything else under those particular acoustic conditions. Again, it's not cut-and-dried. Informed choices need to be made.

And now this is possible

Kowalke: I hope so!

"The new material presents new opportunities."

Going back to what we were talking about earlier, the Berlin production and Lenya. You said it can't be regarded as a model because, of course, there is only one Lenya. The substantial revisions that were made to accommodate Lenya have propagated misconceptions about "Mahagonny" and how it should be cast. Could you talk about that issue?

Kowalke: Right, Weill was always very clear that he wanted Mahagonny performed as an opera in the opera house – unlike either Die Dreigroschenoper or Happy End, which were written for singing actors performing in straight runs in commercial venues. The Berlin production of Mahagonny was a special case, because it was a last resort after Berlin's opera houses had all declined to perform the piece. The only way Weill was going to get it staged in Berlin was to accept Ernst Josef Aufricht's offer to do it as a private venture in the Theater am Kurfuerstendamm, featuring some of the by-then famous singing actors who had appeared in Die Dreigroschenoper. But let's not forget that Harald Paulsen, who sang Macheath and Jimmy, was an operetta tenor of some renown. The conductor in Berlin was Alexander von Zemlinsky, and Adorno claimed that musically this was the best production of the piece that he had heard.

Let me quote from two of Weill's letters. The first dates from February 1930, prior to the premiere in Leipzig. He wrote to Abravanel: "Mahagonny is an opera, an opera for singers. To cast it with actors is absolutely impossible. Only when I specifically have marked it as spoken, should there be any spoken words, and any kinds of changes are possible only with my explicit permission." That's pretty unambiguous. Then later that year, after the first productions, he cautioned: "People who know only the libretto have spread the rumor that Mahagonny could be cast with actors. Of course, that would be absolutely impossible." So here we are, 80 years later, and we still get theatres attempting to perform it as a play with music, or opera houses that cast Jenny with somebody who has to sing it down an octave, who has to speak most of the role, or, most recently at one of the most prestigious opera houses in the world, have someone in the chorus stand next to Jenny in order to sing the higher lines of the role. Why? There are opera singers who can act these days, so casting someone incapable of meeting the vocal demands of the role just seems silly.

Maybe it does still emanate from Lenya's example on the 1958 complete recording, but remember that at that point she didn't sound anything like the girlish songbird she had been in the 1920s. Everything was transposed down for her later in her career, without any indication that this was the case. I think any soprano who's sung the role of Jenny as written will tell you that it is a challenge, and it's no accident that most of the great Lulu's of the second half of the 20th century did Jenny as well and found the role somehow simpatico and in the same Fach, vocally. I once asked Jon Vickers why he hadn't sung Jimmy, and he said "because Jimmy is tougher on the voice than Tristan." It wasn't the high C at the end of Nur die Nacht that was so hard, but all the Gs before that, one after another, just constantly F-G, F-G, so that by the time you got to the high C, there's nothing left. He said that he could do it

on a recording but he wouldn't want to sing it night after night at the opera.

"The role of Jimmy is tougher on the voice than that of Tristan."

Are there any other particular thoughts you would like to share about casting a strong "Mahagonny"?

Kowalke: I've seen wonderful Mahagonnys in opera houses around the world in the last 30 years. But my first live Mahagonny came in 1974. I think it was the fourth production in the United States. The first was the disastrous one on Broadway in the early 1970s. The director of the famous Theater de Lys Threepenny Opera, Carmen Capalbo, decided to produce Mahagonny in similar fashion. It had a run of something like 90 previews while Lenya and Stefan Brecht went to court in attempt to stop the production because of all the unauthorised changes that had been made, including adding a rock band to the orchestra! When it was finally allowed to open after the original musical text had been restored, it closed immediately because of the scathing reviews. The second one was at the San Francisco Spring Opera and then came Washington Opera, I recall. And then in 1974 it was done by the Yale Repertory Theater in collaboration with the Yale School of Music, and they imported singing actors, very much in the spirit of the Berlin production of 1931, in that these weren't primarily opera singers, but most everyone was a good enough singer that they could actually perform it as written. My soon-to-be mother-in-law played Begbick, and so I was there almost every night, for every rehearsal and I guess thirty-odd performances. That's when I learned every note of Mahagonny. Alvin Epstein directed and Otto-Werner Mueller conducted what turned out to be a pretty impressive production, in a 700-seat theatre in New Haven.

There have been many other memorable productions in the subsequent three decades, of course. Ingo Metzmacher's in Hamburg and Ruth Berghaus and Markus Stenz's in Stuttgart, and the spectacular Madrid production that is now available on DVD, conducted brilliantly by Pablo Heras-Casado. And, of

course, the 1979 Metropolitan Opera production, conducted (rather slowly) by James Levine, but with Teresa Stratas as Jenny, whom Lenya anointed as her "dream Jenny."

All right, shall we talk a little bit about the plot itself? Jimmy is sentenced to three days in prison for being an accessory to the murder of a friend, one year's loss of voting rights for disturbing the peace, four years for seducing a girl named Jenny Smith and ten years for singing prohibited songs while a hurricane raged. But for the failure to pay his debts, Jimmy is sentenced to death because "there is no greater criminal than a man without money." This was surely a potent message at the time of the opera's premiere in 1930, but can we also argue that Mahagonny is now more topical than ever?

Kowalke: After Begbick sentences Jimmy to death for not paying his bar tab, a projection/announcement suggests (I'm paraphrasing): "So great is the love of money in our own time that it's unlikely any of you would volunteer to pay Jimmy's debt either." This moment always provokes a nervous laugh from the audience. The spotlight has, in fact, turned on the audience, and suddenly the piece is about us and not just the characters on stage.

I don't think that there is any question that the frequency of productions of this opera goes through cycles in response to such things as recessions, wars, and new atrocities attributable to human greed. It may lag behind actual events by three or four years, but I don't think it's accidental that right now Mahagonny can be seen in eight to ten opera houses each season. That's probably more than at any other time in its history. I think this is directly related to our times and the relevance of Mahagonny to the excesses of today's global capitalism and the inhumanity that comes with the territory. Let's not forget that Weill said Mahagonny was a morality play, a modern-day equivalent of Sodom and Gomorrah. It was intended as a cautionary tale, and it's a sad fact that its warnings have grown, decade by decade, only more prophetic and urgent.

"One of the unauthorised changes that had been made involved the addition of a rock band to the orchestra!"

Weill and Brecht effectively subvert traditional themes and operatic conventions throughout the opera. But their game of "God in Mahagonny" just before Jimmy is executed is perhaps among the most disturbing, at least to me. How does this visit from God play havoc with the traditional "Deus ex machina" operatic convention and turn this convention even further on its head?

Kowalke: Well, that's a tough question. The people of Mahagonny say "Nein!" to God in Mahagonny. Basically we are seeing the death of God before our eyes. I suppose you could then say that this metaphor extends to the death of any "Deus ex machina" because what happens right after that is a funeral march as the finale, which a number of conductors have likened to the end of Götterdämmerung. And what is the message here? "There is nothing that can help a dead man, nothing that can help him or us or you." I think God in Mahagonny connects right to that final fatalist, nihilist moment. Like Sodom and Gomorrah, the city goes up in flames, a destruction which the people of Mahagonny brought upon themselves in their pursuit of pleasure. In the end all they can do is to march aimlessly, carrying placards with conflicting, empty political slogans. There is no way out, and there are no pat answers, no mounted messengers to save the day. This is why the ending of Mahagonny is so disturbing, so overwhelming.

Unfortunately it's often trivialised by conductors who ignore Weill's tempo indications and initially take the funeral march too fast and then keep it at that tempo or speed it up towards the end. Weill writes piu Largo as we approach the final strophe, and then molto Largo, for the final phrase. It really is the end of the world at that point, and it has to carry the full weight of an apocalyptic Mahlerian funeral march. Mahler was one of Weill's gods, second only to Mozart.

It's surely no coincidence that the finale of Act I of Mahagonny begins and ends with a chorale sung by the men of Mahagonny alone, "Haltet euch aufrecht fuerchtet euch nicht." It unmistakably invokes the chorale prelude accompanying the two armored men in Act II of Mozart's Magic Flute, "Der, welcher wandert diese Strasse voll Beschwerden." Late in his career Weill recalled that in Busoni's masterclass they had spent a good deal of time studying Die Zauberfloete, which Busoni regarded as the ideal synthesis, not only of seria, buffa, and Singspiel traditions, but of seriousness and popularity, of the everyday and the eternal. We can now view Weill's entire career as an attempt to follow in those footsteps, developing hybrid forms of musical theatre of social and moral significance for a wider audience, on both sides of the Atlantic.

Interview: Norman Ryan

This transcript has been edited from an oral interview conducted at the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music in New York City in March 2012.