

Forging “The Knife” Kurt Weill Before Broadway

Thursday, January 19, 2017 at 8 p.m.
Alfred Newman Recital Hall
University of Southern California



KNOW BEFORE THE SHOW

- Kurt Weill (1900–1950) was a German Jewish composer known for his collaborations with Bertolt Brecht. A widely popular musician in Weimar Germany, Weill fled Nazi Germany and spent his last years in the United States.
- Weill’s musical aesthetic was innovative and varied, spanning and blending the genres of classical, opera, popular music, and musical theatre.
- Weill was an advocate of socialism who believed that music should serve a socially useful purpose.
- British violinist **DANIEL HOPE** has performed with the world’s major orchestras for 25 years. The winner of the 2015 European Cultural Prize for Music, he is the music director of the Zurich Chamber Orchestra and was a key participant in the documentary *Refuge in Music* and the album *Terezin/Theresienstadt*, both of which showcase works by composers murdered by the Nazis.
- Conductor and pianist **JEFFREY KAHANE** is a soloist with the New York and Los Angeles philharmonics, the San Francisco Symphony, and other major orchestras, and has collaborated with artists including Yo-Yo Ma and Dawn Upshaw. He is wrapping up his final season as music director of Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and is a visiting professor of keyboard studies at the USC Thornton School of Music.

KURT WEILL

Kurt Weill was born in 1900 in Dessau, Germany, and grew up in a religious and musical household. His father was a cantor, and Weill began writing music in his early teens. He studied with renowned German composer Engelbert Humperdinck as a young man, but when his family suffered economic hardship after World War I, Weill left school and returned to his hometown, where he worked as an accompanist and continued composing. Before he was twenty, he was directing operas and operettas at a municipal theater.

In 1920, Weill was accepted as one of Italian composer Ferruccio Busoni’s five master students at the Berlin Academy of Arts. During his studies, Weill supported himself through a variety of jobs, from playing organ in a synagogue to tutoring students in music theory. He also joined the November Group, a group of German expressionist artists that took its name from the starting month of the 1918–19 German revolution, which replaced Germany’s imperial government with a republic. The group was more political than aesthetic, with members advocating leftist, socialist ideas.

Weill became one of the leading composers of his generation in the Weimar Republic. His most famous work, *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), is a “play with music” that Weill made in collaboration with the leftist playwright Bertolt Brecht. Based on John Gay’s eighteenth-century *Beggar’s Opera*, the play is a socialist critique of capitalism that includes the famous songs “Pirate Jenny” and “Mack the Knife.”

When the Nazis came to power, Weill was targeted both as a Jew and for his political views. He fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and moved to New York in 1935. Weill spent the remainder of his life in the United States, where he established himself as an important musical-theatre artist on Broadway and in Hollywood.

Today, Weill is known for his aesthetic innovation and range. As the *New York Times* put it, “Is he a serious classical composer or a Broadway tunesmith?” Kurt Weill was both.

VOICES OF WEILL

During Kurt Weill’s lifetime, his vocal pieces were best known through the voice of his wife, actress Lotte Lenye. But a later recording of “Mack the Knife” by Louis Armstrong and Bobby Darin became a jazz standard, and his songs have been covered by singers as diverse as Nina Simone and Judy Collins (both of whom recorded haunting renditions of “Pirate Jenny”), and PJ Harvey and Marianne Faithfull (who both recorded “Ballad of a Soldier’s Wife”).

THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

The Weimar Republic is an unofficial name for Germany in the period from 1919 to 1933—that is, the time between the November Revolution, when Germany became a republic, and the start of the Nazi era. Named after the city where the republic’s constitutional assembly took place, the Weimar era was a period of democracy, economic stability, social liberty, and exceptional artistic and intellectual creativity. It was the era of Bauhaus, Josephine Baker in Berlin, a vibrant cabaret culture, changing mores, and progressive social reform.

ARTISTS AND THE NAZIS

The authoritarian Nazi regime did not spare artists. Hitler believed there were only two kinds of art: classical representational art that positively portrayed Nazi Germany and Germans, and “degenerate art,” which included almost everything else, especially the modernist experimental art that had flourished in Weimar Germany. The Nazi regime prohibited modern art, dismissing artists from teaching positions and forbidding the exhibition, sale, and sometimes even the creation of modern art. Kurt Weill, along with Arnold Schoenberg and many others, was accused of writing “degenerate music.” Weill was condemned by the Nazis, who staged riots at performances of his music before banning it altogether.

LOS ANGELES CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra (LACO), based in downtown L.A., aims to enrich and connect the community through intimate and transformative musical experiences. Proclaimed “America’s finest chamber orchestra” by Public Radio International, LACO performs both historical masterworks and contemporary compositions. The ensemble was founded in 1968 and has performed under the baton of acclaimed conductor and pianist Jeffrey Kahane for twenty years. During its almost 50-year history, the orchestra has made 31 recordings, toured the world, and earned adulation from audiences and critics alike, including eight ASCAP Awards for Adventurous Programming. LACO presents concerts at venues throughout Los Angeles and organizes outreach programs to inspire a love of classical music in young people. This evening’s program is presented as part of LACO’s “Lift Every Voice” project, a three-week event series inspired by the lives and legacies of courageous émigrés Kurt Weill and Rabbi Joachim Prinz, who were outspoken activists in America’s civil-rights movement.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you agree with Kurt Weill that music should serve a socially useful purpose?
- Why do you think authoritarian regimes target art? Do you think that could happen in 21st-century America?
- Can you think of any contemporary composers who work across musical genres like Weill did?



Photo: Margaret Malandruccolo



Photo: Colorado Symphony Orchestra

DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

Music librarian Andrew Justice has selected the following resources to help you learn more about tonight's event.

BOOKS

- ⦿ Drew, David. **Kurt Weill: A Handbook**. Berkeley: University of California, 1987.
Music Library: ML134.W4 D7 1987
- ⦿ Hinton, Stephen. **Weill's Musical Theater: Stages of Reform**. Berkeley: University Of California, 2012.
Music Library: ML410.W395 H56 2012
- ⦿ Hirsch, Foster. **Kurt Weill on Stage: From Berlin to Broadway**. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.
Cinematic Arts Library, Music Library, and Special Collections: ML410.W395 H57 2002
- ⦿ Katz, Pamela. **The Partnership: Brecht, Weill, Three Women, and Germany on the Brink**. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2015.
Music Library: ML410.W395 K38 2015

AUDIO-VISUAL RECORDINGS

- ⦿ Allen, Jay Presson. **Cabaret**. Bob Fosse, dir. Warner Home Video 785.
Leavey Library: LVYDVD 53
- ⦿ **Die 3 Groschenoper [The 3 Penny Opera]**. G. W. Pabst, dir. Criterion Collection CC1713D.
Leavey Library: LVYDVD 2195
- ⦿ Weill, Kurt. **Kurt Weill's First Score for the American Theatre: Johnny Johnson**. Various Artists. Samuel Matlowky, con. MGM E3447.
- ⦿ Weill, Kurt. **Kurt Weill in America**. Various Artists. Andrea Marcovicci, dir. Andreasong AND-07.
Music Library CD-AUDIO: 12387mus

PERIODICALS AND DATABASES

Access these electronic resources through the USC Libraries homepage at libraries.usc.edu.

- ⦿ **The Kurt Weill Newsletter**. New York: The Kurt Weill Foundation for Music.
- ⦿ **Studies in Musical Theatre**. Bristol: Intellect.
- ⦿ **Classical Music in Video**. Alexander Street.
- ⦿ **Metropolitan Opera on Demand**. The Metropolitan Opera.
- ⦿ **Naxos Music Library**. Naxos.

