

THE THREE PENNY OPERA



By Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht

I was aroused straightaway by the raw intensity of the songs ... — Bob Dylan

Many have tried to imitate it. No one has succeeded.
— Harold Prince

The Threepenny Opera turns the accepted values of the good life upside down. — Brooks Atkinson

Kurt Weill



Born on the 2nd of March, 1900 in Dessau, Germany, the son of a cantor, Weill displayed musical talent early on. By the time he was twelve, he was composing and mounting concerts and dramatic works in the hall above his family's quarters in the Gemeindehaus. After studying theory and composition, Weill enrolled at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik, but found the conservative training and the infrequent lessons with Engelbert Humperdinck too stifling. After a season as conductor of the newly formed municipal theater in Lüdenscheid,

he returned to Berlin and was accepted into Ferruccio Busoni's master class in composition. By 1925, a series of performances in Berlin and at international music festivals established Weill as one of the leading composers of his generation. A commission from the Baden-Baden Music Festival in 1927 led to the creation of *Mahagonny* (*Ein Songspiel*), Weill's first collaboration with Brecht. The *succès de scandale* of *Mahagonny* encouraged Weill and Brecht to continue work on a full-length opera. Exploiting their aggressive popular song-style, Weill and Brecht also wrote several works for singing actors in the commercial theater, including *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Happy End*.

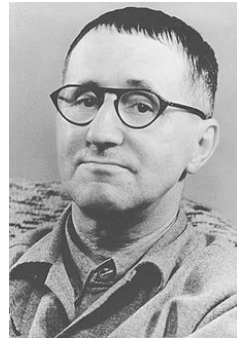
The music

Music is very strongly present in *The Threepenny Opera*. The play's score is strongly influenced by jazz. "The Ballad of Mackie Messer," later translated into "Mack the Knife," became the play's most well known song. It was written at the last minute because the actor playing Macheath threatened to quit if his character did not receive a proper introduction. "Mack the Knife" was later covered by Louis Armstrong, Bobby Darin, Ella Fitzgerald, and Michael Bublé, as well as the famous duet by Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin. "Pirate Jenny" was famously covered by singer and activist Nina Simone on 1964's *Nina Simone in Concert*. She gave the song a grim civil rights undertone, with the ship "the black freighter" symbolizing the coming black revolution.

Bertolt Brecht

German poet, playwright, and theatre director Bertolt Brecht was born on the 10th of February, 1898. An influential theatre practitioner of the twentieth century, Brecht made equally significant contributions to dramaturgy and theatrical production, the latter particularly through the seismic impact of the tours undertaken by the Berliner Ensemble — the post-war theatre company operated by Brecht and his wife and long-time collaborator, the actress Helene Weigel — with its internationally acclaimed productions.

From his late twenties Brecht remained a life-long committed Marxist who, in developing the combined theory and practice of his “epic theatre,” explored the theatre as a forum for political ideas and the creation of a critical aesthetics of dialectical materialism. Brecht's modernist concern with drama-as-a-medium led to his refinement of the “epic form” of the drama. The dramatic form is related to similar modernist innovations in other arts, including the strategy of divergent chapters in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, Sergei Eisenstein's evolution of a constructivist “montage” in the cinema, and Picasso's introduction of cubist “collage” in the visual arts.



The source

The Threepenny Opera was based on John Gay's early eighteenth century ballad-opera, *The Beggar's Opera*. It is one of the watershed plays in Augustan drama and is the only example of the once thriving genre of satirical ballad opera to remain popular today. Ballad operas were satiric musical plays that used some of the conventions of opera, but without recitative. The lyrics of the airs in the piece are set to popular broadsheet ballads, opera arias, church hymns and folk tunes of the time. *The Beggar's Opera* was a double satire of the Italian opera tradition and of the political corruption of incumbent Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole and his government.

The “Alienation Effect”

The Threepenny Opera breaks the 4th wall on numerous occasions, using a technique called the “Alienation Effect,” a distancing technique. Since Brecht thought theater should be a tool for the audience to think about how to change the world, he utilizes this technique to create some distance between the audience and the plot. In his stage instructions, he insists that the actors retain some of their distance by coming across not as their characters but as actors playing characters. Many of the songs in *The Threepenny Opera* create additional alienation because their lyrics often do not reflect what is happening in the play. For example, the song “Pirate Jenny,” which Polly sings to her wedding guests during her marriage to Macheath, has nothing to do with marriage, Macheath, or Polly's life. The song reminds the audience that they are watching a play, rather than allowing them to lose themselves in the story. Brecht uses onstage signs in his play -- for example, he calls for the abrupt and contextually inappropriate arrival of a sign that reads “It is more blessed to give than to receive” to remind the audience that they are sitting in a theater — not inside a small shop in Soho. [adapted from SparkNotes; notes on Weill and Brecht adapted from Wikipedia and other sources]

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