

## Summary

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### **A Path to Interpretation of the Kurt Weill' Songs in the Context of the Composer's Stylistic Diversity**

The songs of Kurt Weill (1900–1950), one of the most outstanding reformers of the 20th century musical theater, belong to the vocal canon. The performances of Lotte Lenya – the composer's wife, Milva, Teresa Stratas, Ute Lemper, Anne Sofie von Otter or – in Poland – Krystyna Tkacz and many other artists revealed the originality of the song as a musical genre, its unique literary, musical and stage values, as well as the variety of Weill's music.

The renaissance of this art, showing its richness, is, however, a relatively young and still open phenomenon. Due to the historical and political conditions of the composer's life, his artistic path was dramatically interrupted in the mid-1930s and reborn in a completely new cultural, social and economic context.

In the second half of the 1920s, in collaboration with Bertolt Brecht, Weill created an innovative genre of song, which many composers later tried to duplicate (with varying degrees of success). It expressed the modernism's fascination for combining high and popular art. Brecht and Weill managed to make this combination unique and coherent, creating a progressive genre of high poetic and musical values. A song was also a theatrical novelty, belonging to the epic theater poetics as its center and the essential means of the distancing effect, which goes back to the aesthetic thought of Ferruccio Busoni, Weill's teacher. At the same time, it has a gestural character, so it requires – especially through the rhythmic layer – expressive performance. Moreover song is an engaged art, fighting fiercely against social inequality, hypocrisy and evil.

Even before meeting Brecht, Weill experimented with vocal forms that foreshadowed the "song", and after parting with the playwright, he continued his songwriting in his last works in Germany and in exile in France and England. At that time, he composed songs-masks, taking the style of the French chanson and using stylization as the basic artistic means. Under this mask, however, he developed his own, immediately recognizable musical

language, distinguished by its refinement in the melorhythmic and harmonic layers, as well as the verbal and musical relationships.

In the American period Weill contributed to the courageous expansion and refreshment of the musical plays thanks to his cooperation with the best librettists and poets, especially Maxwell Anderson and Ira Gershwin. In this way, he co-created the formula of the adult musical (ambitious libretto, precise dramaturgy, in-depth characterization of the characters), for which the musical *Lady in the Dark* turned out to be a breakthrough. On the other hand, in the later Broadway opera *Street Scene* the composer developed the idea of national American music, also using a variety of song-arias and not giving up references to European classics. In his latest works he boldly alluded to American root music (blues, country), ahead of the musical theater of his time and paving the way for Leonard Bernstein and many other artists.

However, the composer's winning streak was interrupted by his premature death. Later comments and evaluations of Weill's work often closed themselves in harmful stereotypes, detached from the music itself. As a consequence, Weill – a composer with a highly original, idiomatic style – is thus only one, but at the same time there are many Weilles: German and American (and perhaps also French); modernist, avant-garde and popular, commercial; lively and emanating with melancholy or even deep pessimism; a successful man and a partially forgotten or deprecated artist; faithful to the ideals of youth and able to compromise. Is it all mutually exclusive, depriving Weill's work of authenticity? No, on the contrary – his music reflects a multidimensional personality, searching and often deeply experienced by the circumstances of life in a very difficult period in the history of Europe and the world.

In my dissertation I put forward the thesis that Weill's work, constantly evolving, and the song genre has a unique and syncretic character in musical culture. It combines classical and popular, high and low, music-poetic and acting, lyrical and dramatic elements.

Therefore, Weill's performers face special challenges. Hence the second thesis: performance of Weill's song genre requires a special approach, which I call the "third way". It combines the aesthetics and technique of classical singing and popular music. The third way is also based on a reliable vocal technique, but modified adequately to the needs of specific expression. Its foundations can be seen in the classic interpretations of Lenya, which were later developed by many outstanding singers and actors.

The following detailed research questions emerged from my hypotheses:

- what is the general specificity of the song as a musical genre?
- are Weill's songs a homogeneous or internally diverse group, and if so – how can they be divided?
- what is the artistic language of individual songs?
- what is the performance tradition of Weill' songs, what characterizes it, what is its history and outstanding representatives?
- how should you sing Kurt Weill's songs?
- what is Weill's reception in Poland and the Polish performance of his songs?

These questions structured my work. It consists of the musical album *Speak Low* and a dissertation divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, I have constructed my own vision of the composer's biography, written from the perspective of the dynamics of his artistic career and personal research, as well as their cultural, historical, political, social and economic contexts. I have also identified the place of the composer's most important collaborators on the map of his life and work. In the second chapter – using literary and musicological competences – I interpreted the entirety of Weill's output in detail in order to find its constitutive features, define the compositional idiom and its entanglement in current musical or theatrical trends, genre and stylistic conventions of the epoch, and interpret the most important works. In this chapter, I focused on issues that are particularly related to the song genre. The next chapter is devoted to a detailed analysis and interpretation of the songs from the *Speak Low* album (literariness, musical poetics, performativity, vocality). The analytical part was preceded by the first discussion of the distinctive features of the song in previous research, and also proposed Weill's song typology (epic song, protosong, song-mask, musical song, song in the aria or *Lied* type). Later in the chapter I presented the profiles of outstanding song performers and defined their style, and finally – on the basis of previous arrangements – I tried to define the overall style of Weill's songs performance. In turn, the fourth chapter concerns "Polish" Weill, and thus all presentations of the composer's works in Poland and outstanding Polish interpreters of his songs. I put forward the thesis that the theatre of songs, a Polish specialty, was shaped to a large extent based on the repertoire of songs by Weill and Brecht.

The *Speak Low* album is a collection of thirteen different songs, representing all stylistic varieties of Weill's work. Moreover, the selected works represent a wide range of performance problems typical for Weill's songs, and allow the artistic activity to verify the main theses of the dissertation.

The conclusions of my artistic activities and research are as follows:

- Weill's songs are dualistic. On the one hand, they require great musicality and full performance discipline (including fidelity to the musical text and intonation control) as well as good familiarity with contemporary music due to interval, harmonic and metrorhythmic complications. On the other hand, they provide a large space for interpretation (shaping the phrase, modifying the timbre of the voice or articulation, etc.);
- songs definitely require a culture of words that cannot be treated neutrally. Weill's word is always a message, it must be legible, expressive, and engaged. Here, too, a space for interpretation and possible modification opens up, as Weill's performers definitely "do not sing notes, but words and phrases and sentences" (I. Bostridge);
- due to the epic genesis of songs, their performances always show some distance, irony, and quotation marks. Pathos, excessive sentimentality or psychologization do not fit this music. Weill can of course be sung like Puccini or – definitely – Mozart, but with a pinch of salt. This does not mean, however, that there are no emotions in this music;
- songs require knowledge of the performance style and good taste, which balances the extremes of neutral vocal correctness that destroys the character of this work, and too expansive acting, depriving songs of their musical value.