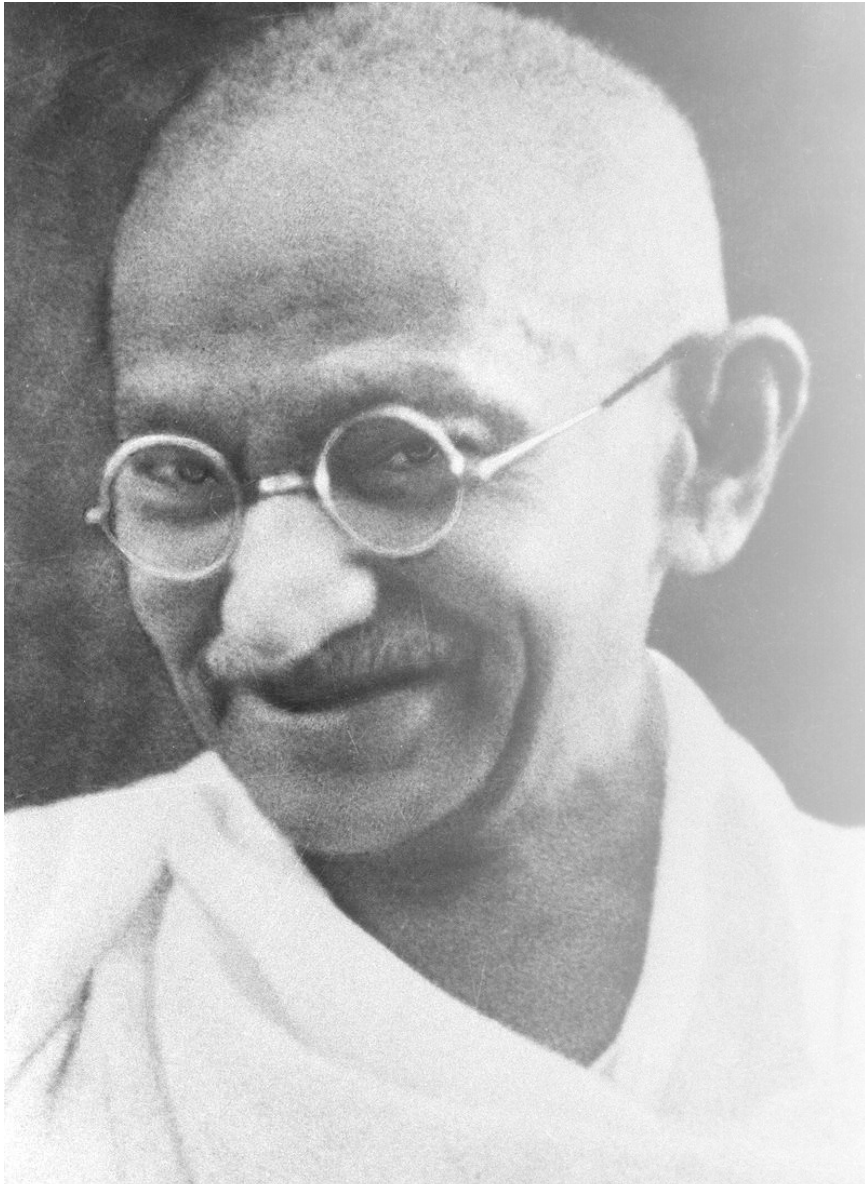


Opera & Real Life



II. Street Politics

May 10, 2022

Street Politics

JUST OCCASIONALLY, OPERA TAKES ON SOCIAL ISSUES, not as high-minded fiction like Beethoven's *Fidelio*, but as direct polemical engagement with current events. Notable among such attempts in the earlier Twentieth Century are the works inspired by the playwright and activist **Bertold Brecht**: the *Threepenny Opera* and *Mahagonny* by **Kurt Weill**, and (indirectly) *The Cradle Will Rock* by **Marc Blitzstein**. By their nature, such works teeter between the genres of musical theater and true opera, but the Weill works at least have lasted well beyond the times out of which they sprang.

American composer **Philip Glass** has chosen a different approach. His "Portrait Trilogy"—*Einstein on the Beach*, *Satyagraha*, and *Akhmaten*—focus on real people whose life and ideas had real social consequences, seen from the perspective of posterity. For the politics of satire and agitation, he substitutes an almost timeless ritual of contemplation, in which the meaning of his protagonists' lives is allowed to permeate the awareness of the audience by a kind of musical osmosis. *rb.*

A. Brecht & Weill

The first collaboration between **Kurt Weill** (1900–50) and **Bertold Brecht** (1898–1956) was a setting of seven poems that became the 45-minute political satire the *Mahagonny-Songspiel*, staged in a boxing ring in Weimar in 1927. The pair later developed this into the three-act opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, which premiered in 1930. In between, the pair collaborated on their greatest success, *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*), a reworking by Brecht of John Gay's proletarian *Beggar's Opera* that took London by storm two centuries before in 1728—though the target of Brecht's attacks was the decadence and corruption of the Weimar Republic.

The Threepenny Opera has had many productions over the succeeding decades, mostly mounted by theaters rather than opera houses. So for our brief sampling, we turn to the film made by **G. W. Pabst** (1885–1967) in 1931. It was not until the last decades of the century that *Mahagonny* entered the repertoire of major opera companies, but there have been a number of notable productions since, including the 2010 one from Madrid that we shall watch.

- ♪ **Weill:** *Die Dreigroschenoper*, opening
Film, 1931; d. GW Pabst; Rudolf Forster (Mackie Messer), Ernst Busch (ballad singer)
- ♪ **Weill:** *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, Act I excerpts
Madrid, 2010; c. Pablo Heras-Casado, d. Alex Ollé and Carlus Padrissa;
English translation by Michael Feingold. Jane Henschel (Begbick),
Measha Brueggergosman (Jenny), Michael König (Jimmy)

B. Blitzstein

Marc Blitzstein (1905–64) originally had no time for composers such as Kurt Weill, whom he saw as prostituting their art to please the public. He was a serious composer, making the pilgrimage to Europe to study at the fountainhead of modernism, with **Arnold Schoenberg** and later **Nadia Boulanger**. While in Berlin, however, he met Brecht and played for him a song he had written to a text by **Polly Jean Harvey**, “The nickel under the foot.” Learning that it was about a young woman forced into prostitution, Brecht urged him to write an entire opera addressing *all* kinds of exploitation; the result was the musical play *The Cradle Will Rock*. The premiere was announced for 1938, but federal officials shuttered the theater. So led by producer **John Houseman** and director **Orson Welles**, the audience trekked uptown to an empty theater where the work was presented without orchestra, without decor, and the performers all singing from the auditorium to avoid union rules that would have prevented them from stepping onstage.

Although many subsequent productions have attempted to reproduce the conditions of that premiere, none have been recorded in usable video. So after a couple of short clips, we will watch scenes from the

1999 **Tim Robbins** film *Cradle Will Rock*, about the events surrounding that premiere and similar cases of censorship, including the destruction of the leftist murals painted by **Diego Rivera** for the Rockefeller Center in New York.

- ♪ **Blitzstein:** “The nickel under the foot”
sung first by the composer, and then by Patti LuPone
- ♪ **Robbins:** *Cradle Will Rock*, selected scenes
Movie, 1999; Hank Azaria (Marc Blitzstein), Emily Watson (Olive Stanton / Moll), John Turturro (Aldo Silvano / Larry Foreman)

C. Glass

Philip Glass (born in Baltimore in 1937) is one of the founders of *minimalism*, in which cells of relatively simple musical material are repeated and layered to create complex, often mesmerizing effects. Although he has written many other works for the stage, his operatic legacy rests on what he called his “Portrait Trilogy”: *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), *Satyagraha* (1980, about Ghandi), and *Akhmaten* (1984, about an Egyptian pharaoh). All three operas have minimal plots, being built on a series of tableaux presenting moments in the life and especially the spiritual development of the protagonist.

Each of the acts in *Satyagraha* is presided over by a tutelary figure, representing **Ghandi’s** past, present, and future: Leo **Tolstoy** in Act I, Rabindranath **Tagore** in Act II, and Martin Luther **King** in Act III. As all include extended passages which cannot be easily shortened, we shall confine ourselves to only three: the opening of Act II, where Ghandi returns to Durban, South Africa, to encounter a hostile crowd; a scene near the start of Act III, when he leads a group of non-violent protesters on a march to support striking miners from Newcastle, Natal to the Transvaal; and the very end of the opera.

- ♪ **Glass:** *Satyagraha*, scenes as above
Metropolitan Opera, 2008; c. Dante Anzolini, d. Phelim McDermott;
Richard Croft (Ghandi)