Class 11 : Street Politics

A. Brecht & Weill

1. Section title 1 (Brecht & Weill)

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 collaborations between the activist playwright **Bertolt Brecht** (1898–1956) and the composer **Kurt Weill** (1900–50), among them the *Threepenny Opera* and *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny.* Eventually, though, Weill's wish to ingratiate his audience clashed with Brecht's desire to alienate them into forcing them to think, and the pair parted. Brecht ended up in East Germany; Weill in New York. Both Weill works, and the one by Marc **Blitzstein** I will touch on in the second hour, teeter between the genres of musical theater and true opera; indeed, we are not going to encounter a single "normal" opera in this entire class. So be it.

2. Grosz: *Street Scene* (1921) and *Eclipse of the Sun* (1926, Heckscher Museum LI)

Look at these two pictures by **George Grosz** (1893–1959) satirizing the Weimar Republic—the government that took power after the War. The reparations imposed by the Versailles Treaty of 1919, coupled with raging inflation, crippled the Weimar economy. But as usual the pain fell disproportionally on those least able to bear it—hence the wounded veteran versus the affluent businessman in the upper picture. In 1924, however, the United States took a hand in stabilizing the German economy by means of the **Dawes Plan**, which offered loans to Germany to help them pay off their debts to England and France. Grosz summed up the situation in a 1926 painting called *The Eclipse of the Sun*. The central figure is **Hindenburg**, the former general, now President of the German Republic. Both a bloody sword and a Christian cross lie on the table before him; a fat industrialist whispers in his ear; around the table sit the literally faceless bureaucrats. The almighty Dollar has blotted out the sun, while the blinded donkey representing the German people is about to be lured over the edge. And the confused populace was prey to street evangelists and peddlers of paranoia, as shown in this picture, *The Prophet*.

3. Grosz: *The Prophet*

This was Brecht's target in *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), a reworking of John Gay's proletarian *Beggar's Opera* that took London by storm two centuries before in 1728; we heard about that in the first class. Like the original, this was a play with songs, not through-composed, but still the music made Weill's name. It is often staged—I have actually seen Brecht's own production with the old East German **Berliner Ensemble**, collaborated on another starring Weill's widow **Lotte Lenya**, and mounted a production myself—but it does not fare well on video. So instead I am showing you the opening of the 1931 film made by the German director **G. W. Pabst** (1885–1967). I include the credit sequence,

because the words of the song under it are among Brecht's most trenchant. You will know the *Ballad of Mack the Knife* that follows, and of course **Mackie Messer** is the well-dressed gentleman who appears first on the screen. Note the rrrrolled R's of the Berlin accent!

4. Pabst: *Die Dreigroschenoper*, opening scenes
5. A modern production of the *Mahagonny-Songspiel*

A little earlier in the same year (1828), Weill set several songs by Brecht, and even used some of Brecht's tunes, to create a 45-minutes piece called the ***Mahagonny-Songspiel***. It is a political allegory, or as described in the first program note, "*a short epic play which simply draws conclusions from the irresistible decline of our existing social classes*." **Caspar Neher**, the designer for the premiere in Baden-Baden, created a stage like a boxing ring and project the following titles between scenes. I am showing them because they also serve as a snyopsis for the full-length opera that Brecht and Weill expanded the piece into later, from which I shall pay for the rest of the hour.

6. Poster for *Mahagonny*, Madrid 2010
7. Weill: *Mahagonny*, opening scenes (Madrid 2010)

I'm going to play Mahagonny in a 2010 production from Madrid. Don't ask me why a German opera should be performed in Spain in an English translation, but Brecht's libretto was also multilingual; the Alabama Song, sung by the whore Jenny who enters in the second scene, is one of the two numbers from the original *Songspiel* written in Brecht's peculiar version of American slang. You will see that he also makes free with other American references, with deliberate disregard to American geography. Widow Begblick and the other two fugitives from justice whose car breaks down at the beginning (at least in a more normal production) are wanted by the police in Pensacola, but they somehow land up on the West Coast, living off miners from the Gold Rush and loggers from Alaska. Go figure. Anyway, they decide to found a city right there, and the first people who move in are the whores. Note the music at the beginning; it is clearly the work of a serious composer.

8. Other *Mahagonny* productions

Not all *Mahagonny* productions are this grungy. Here are three that take quite different approaches, and I have a link to another one online from just two weeks ago in Parma that is almost as well done and much brighter. But I sort of like the Madrid version, and the way it spreads Astroturf over the rubble to make a quasi-Palm-Springs, as you will see. I'll play the latter part of the first act. We meet the protagonist, lumberjack Jimmy Mahoney from Alaska—or at least in the original he's Mahoney, pronounced mAhonny; in this version he is Jimmy McIntyre. Anyway, he is tired of this life and wants to get out. But then a hurricane—or typhoon—approaches, and Weill writes that most academic of forms, an orchestra fugue. Then news comes that the storm has killed their pursuers in Pensacola, and all break into a song of defiance, with the basic moral of Dog Eats Dog.

9. Weill: *Mahagonny*, Act I, Jimmy's song (Madrid 2010) — only if time
10. Weill: *Mahagonny*, Act I, conclusion (Madrid 2010)
11. — still from the above

The whole opera ends in a similar song of defiance, with the original leftist slogans of freedom and solidarity so that it is now solidarity for the strong and freedom for the rich. The naïve and idealistic Jimmy has been tried and executed for bankruptcy, and all come together without a twinge of conscience to deter them.

12. Weill: *Mahagonny*, Act III finale — only if time
13. — still from the above

B. Blitzstein

14. Section title 2 (Marc Blitzstein)

Marc Blitzstein (1905–64) originally had no time for composers such as Kurt Weill, whom he saw a 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*. Here is the introduction to that song, sung by Blitzstein himself, and then in a 1985 production featuring **Patti LuPone**. There is no doubt that this was musical theater, if not actually opera, responding to real life in the waning years of the Depression.

15. Blitzstein: "A nickel under the foot," intro, sung by the composer
16. Blitzstein: "A nickel under the foot" (Patti LuPone)
17. Orson Welles, John Houseman, and poster for *The Cradle Will Rock*

The Cradle Will Rock was actually sponsored by the **Works Progress Administration**, and was scheduled for premiere in 1938, as this poster advertises. But the money was tight, and if something had to go, it was bound to be a play about labor unions, coming dangerously close to communism. Only hours before the scheduled opening, Federal agents seized the scenery and costumes and shuttered the theater. But nothing daunted, producer **John Houseman** and director **Orson Welles** found an alternate theater 25 blocks uptown, met the audience outside the original venue, and led them on a march towards Harlem, 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.

18. Poster for *Cradle Will Rock* (Tim Robbins, 1999)

In 1999, **Tim Robbins** made a film about that premiere and similar cases of censorship. So you will see his reconstruction of the opening, intercut with scenes of fat cats at the Met Mueseum costume ball, and the destruction of some leftist murals painted by **Diego Rivera** for the Rockefeller Center in NYC.

19. *Cradle Will Rock* (1999), scenes of the Blitzstein premiere

C. Glass

20. Section title 3 (Philip 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 *Akhnaten* (1984, about the pharaoh who tried to introduce monotheism into Egypt). All three operas have minimal plots, being built instead on a series of tableaux presenting moments in the life and especially the spiritual development of the protagonist. Words are unimportant; *Satyagraha,* in fact, is sung entirely in **Sanskrit** taken from the *Bhagavad Ghita*, with minimal projected translations.

21. Ghandi transformation
22. Poster for *Satyagraha* (Metropolitan Opera, 2008)

Satyagraha is essentially about Ghandi's transformation from the dapper young lawyer shown here to the ascetic guru shown here. It takes place in South Africa, where Ghandi worked on behalf of the large population of immigrant workders from India. The title, *Satyagraha*, is the name of the philosophy of non-violent resistance that he started. Each of the acts 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. All are comprised of scenes whose length is essential to the composer's effect. So we shall confine ourselves to only three. First, a scene from early in Act II, where Ghandi returns to Durban to encounter a hostile crowd. The giant puppets created by the director-designer team of **Phelim McDermott** and **Julian Crouch**, are figures from Hindu mythology in Ghandi's mind; the mocking crowd is stylized but real; and the woman in white is an historical figure, **Mrs. Alexander**, the wife of the Durban police chief who rescues Ghandi by sheltering him under her white umbrella.

23. Glass: *Satyagraha*, from Act II, scene 1
24. Ghandi news photographs

Act II will end with the ceremonial burning of the registration cards that colored people were compelled to carry in South Africa at the time. And Act III, though shown here in slow-motiom, begins with action: the 1913 march where Ghandi leads a group of non-violent protesters from Newcastle in the Natal province to the Transvaal to support striking miners, and their demonstration is broken up by the police.

25. Glass: *Satyagraha*, from Act III, scene 1
26. — still from the above

And to so the final scene of all, in which Ghandi is alone onstage, singing a repeated upwardly rising Phrygian scale, while his successor, **Martin Luther King**, looks on.

27. Glass: *Satyagraha*, closing moments
28. Ending title (Ghandi)