



Smithsonian Associates

Kurt Weill: 1900-1950
Romantic Satirist, Modern Populist
with Dr. Rachel Franklin

Smithsonian Associates
Aug. 15th, 2023

Syllabus and works

"I have never acknowledged the difference between serious music and light music. There is only good music and bad music." Kurt Weill

Throughout his career, whether shaping German modernism in Weimar or composing musical theater masterpieces in the United States, Kurt Weill never wavered from his belief that music was a democratic art and, particularly after he came to America in 1935, he held strongly that this country best embodied that democracy.

Weill's compositions appear to vary so widely that it can be hard to pinpoint what kind of composer he was, but hidden in his beguiling style are some distinctive through lines that illuminate the very core of his artistic philosophy.

In this presentation we explore a selection of the astonishingly influential works that resulted from Weill's extraordinary partnerships with both playwright Bertolt Brecht and singer Lotte Lenya. We follow Weill and Lenya, married, divorced and married again, as they first flee from the Nazis to Paris and then arrive in style in New York. We trace Weill's subsequent artistic

evolution on Broadway working with lyricists including Ira Gershwin, Ogden Nash, Langston Hughes, and Maxwell Anderson — collaborations that produced such beloved songs as “Speak Low,” “September Song,” “Lost in the Stars,” and “My Ship.” Featured works today include *Mahagonny*, *The Threepenny Opera*, *Knickerbocker Holiday*, *Lady in the Dark*, *Street Scene*, and others.

British-born Franklin has been a featured speaker for organizations including the Library of Congress and NPR, exploring intersections among classical and jazz music, film scores, and the fine arts.

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Works discussed, media used:

(All works are by Kurt Weill)

Violin concerto, Op. 12, 1924

- Elisabeth Glab, violin and the Ensemble Musique Oblique conducted by Philippe Herreweghe

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZgnmmhLc_U

The Threepenny Opera, 1928

- "Seeräuber Jenny" (Pirate Jenny), Lotte Lenya in the original 1931 film *Die Dreigroschenoper*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ec0clERjQ5A>

- "Pirate Jenny", Nina Simone, Carnegie Hall, 1964

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gLmZnC8yRU>

The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny, (Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny) 1930

- "The Alabama Song", David Bowie, Berlin, 2002

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNCEURBYEGo>

The Seven Deadly Sins, (Die sieben Todsünden) 1933

- Opera North, Wallis Giunta, Shelly Eva Haden

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCCRdufpbtQ>

Symphony No.2, (Fantaisie symphonique) 1934

- Frankfurt Radio Symphony, Marie Jacquot, conductor

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmKsoqXFbnQ>

Knickerbocker Holiday, 1938

- "September Song", Lotte Lenya, 1958

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4L0mmbWH97A>

- "How can you tell an American", The Collegiate Chorale, Bryce Pinkham, Ben Davis

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PwhBJsx_1Ww

Lady in the Dark, 1941

- "My Ship", Julie Andrews, 1968

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VarHwoBwmTo>

"Buddy on the Night Shift", 1942

- Teresa Stratas

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gHtsPW8gQg>

"Schikelgruber", 1942

- Mark Nadler

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcVOVTzXXtg>

One Touch of Venus, 1943

- "Speak Low", Kurt Weill, 1943

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgQJvNhuiAE>

Kiddush, 1946

- Hans Peter Blochwitz, BBC Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RI2jTYqso0>

Street Scene, 1947

- "Moon Faced, Starry Eyed", Johnny Mercer and Benny Goodman, 1947

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOzLGkcSGCE>

Lost in the Stars, 1949

- "Lost in the Stars", Todd Duncan, 1949

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygkCMrC5t0Q>

The Threepenny Opera, 1928, "Macky Messer"

- "Mack the Knife" (Macky Messer), Der Dreigroschenoper, Kurt Gerron, 1931

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWPvx1KPA9Y>

- Louis Armstrong, Lotte Lenya, 1955

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5362wt7-dEM>

- Frank Sinatra, Quincy Jones, recording session, 1984

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=elazK40JkBM>