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*The Threepenny Opera*

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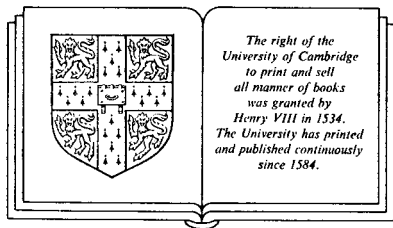
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# Kurt Weill

## *The Threepenny Opera*

*Edited by*  
STEPHEN HINTON



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In memory of Carl Dahlhaus (1928–1989)

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## *General preface*

This is a series of studies of individual operas, written for the serious opera-goer or record-collector as well as the student or scholar. Each volume has three main concerns. The first is historical: to describe the genesis of the work, its sources or its relation to literary prototypes, the collaboration between librettist and composer, and the first performance and subsequent stage history. This history is itself a record of changing attitudes towards the work, and an index of general changes of taste. The second is analytical and it is grounded in a very full synopsis which considers the opera as a structure of musical and dramatic effects. In most volumes there is also a musical analysis of a section of the score, showing how the music serves or makes the drama. The analysis, like the history, naturally raises questions of interpretation, and the third concern of each volume is to show how critical writing about an opera, like production and performance, can direct or distort appreciation of its structural elements. Some conflict of interpretation is an inevitable part of this account; editors of the handbooks reflect this – by citing classic statements, by commissioning new essays, by taking up their own critical position. A final section gives a select bibliography, a discography and guides to other sources.

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## *Preface*

If popularity breeds myths, then the enduringly popular *Threepenny Opera* has surely engendered its fair share. The following quotation, with its blend of truth, half-truth and fond fabrication, is a typical example. It is taken from an article published in British Airways' in-flight magazine, *High Life*, in celebration of the city of Berlin's 750th anniversary. In the 1920s, it says,

Prussian discipline was replaced by the exuberance of the 'Mad Twenties'. Berlin emerged as the country's first truly cosmopolitan centre, and a permissive air pervaded the city. These were the 'divinely decadent days' of Christopher Isherwood's Sally Bowles. Theatre and cabarets flourished; jazz was imported from America; modern painters and poets attracted attention with radical ideas; film directors produced classics like the *Blue Angel*; composer-writers like Bertold [sic] Brecht gave the world exciting works like *The Threepenny Opera*. For an all-too-brief period Berlin became the most creative city in Europe. (*High Life*, May 1987, p. 12)

For better or for worse, *The Threepenny Opera* has become synonymous with the nostalgic, clichéd image of the 'Mad Twenties'. As for Brecht being the work's composer, Brecht himself was partly responsible for that myth when he remarked that he 'dictated to Weill, bar by bar, by whistling and above all performing'. Yet it is not just Brecht and popular imagination that leave his other collaborators out of the reckoning. In 1960, Siegfried Unseld, director of the West German publishers Suhrkamp, edited a volume entitled *Brechts Dreigroschenbuch*, in which he reprinted the various incarnations of the 'Threepenny' theme (opera libretto, film scenario, 'trial' and, in subsequent editions, the novel) as well as some of the more substantial critical writings on the opera. Twenty-five years later the same publishers brought out *Brechts Dreigroschenoper* (ed. Werner Hecht, Frankfurt/Main, 1985). Why only Brecht? In one respect the latter volume was only conforming with publishing formalities: Hecht's is one of a series of books which present source materials and other

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writings relating to Brecht's major theatrical works. Yet the title also reflects a bias: the section 'concerning the music' constitutes only a tenth of that particular book's contents.

In going to the other extreme and naming just Weill on the cover, it could also be argued that the present volume is similarly conforming with formalities dictated by the series in which it appears. If it nonetheless reflects a bias, it is also at pains to correct one. By concentrating on Brecht's contribution, much of the previous literature on *The Threepenny Opera* has tended to make light of Weill's side of the collaboration, thereby passing up an opportunity, which the Cambridge Opera Handbook series now affords, to consider the work in its generic context, as 'opera'.

Of course *The Threepenny Opera*'s claim to being a 'real' opera is scarcely greater than that of the work on which it is based, *The Beggar's Opera*. Each is *sui generis*. Each stands at a remove from the traditional opera of its age while, at the same time, anticipating future developments in the genre. *The Beggar's Opera* was at once a send-up of the 'outlandish' *opera seria* and an adumbration of the later *Singspiel*. By the same token, *The Threepenny Opera* can be seen as 'the most consistent reaction to Wagner', to quote Weill's own description, as well as an important model for later innovations in twentieth-century music theatre, not least the American musical (see chapter 4 on '*The Threepenny Opera* in America'). In fact, the generic question could be said to form the very substance of the piece. As Weill wrote, it 'presented us with the opportunity to make "opera" the subject matter for an evening in the theatre'.

In covering 'history, analysis and criticism', the present volume largely follows the guidelines for the series laid down in the general preface. Partly because of *The Threepenny Opera*'s hybrid nature, however, it did not always prove either possible or desirable to make neat distinctions between these three concerns. They frequently overlap. In dealing with the genesis, for example, chapter 2 traces a gradual transformation of borrowed and original material which continued from the time of the work's inception in the winter of 1927/28 until shortly before Brecht's death in 1956. The nature of the sources and the revisions – as well as ignorance of them – has had a direct bearing on the critical postures discussed in later chapters.

The work's structure also necessitated an analytical approach different from other volumes in the series. Chapter 1, a hitherto unpublished synopsis of the plot written by Brecht himself, is intended among other things as a quick reference guide to the sequence of

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individual numbers. Rather than analyse these numbers individually, however, the chapter on ‘Motifs, tags and related matters’ by David Drew draws attention to the way in which the work as a whole is unified by long-range thematic connections. Analytical issues of a more local kind are addressed in several of the other chapters. Of the previously published material reprinted here, the essays by Theodor W. Adorno, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin appear for the first time in English translation.

I should like to thank all the contributors to this book, not least for their patience during its protracted genesis. Thanks are also due to the following institutions and their staff: the Bertolt Brecht Archive, Berlin (GDR) ; the Nationalbibliothek, Universal Edition and the Stadtbibliothek, Vienna; the Weill-Lenya Research Center, New York; and the Weill/Lenya Archive at Yale University. Research expenses were funded in part with a grant from the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music. I gratefully acknowledge the generous support and encouragement of the Foundation’s director and archivist, David Farneth, and its president, Kim Kowalke. Steve Giles and Jürgen Schebera helped with the collation of primary sources. Michael Zimmermann critically scrutinized large portions of the manuscript. I am indebted, above all, to Linda Holt, who collaborated in research and made countless editorial suggestions.

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