



KURT WEILL

RISE & FALL OF THE CITY OF MAHAGONNY



Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny (Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny) is a political-satirical opera composed by Kurt Weill to a German libretto by Bertolt Brecht. It was first performed in Leipzig on 9 March 1930.

To an extent, Mahagonny is an opera that satirizes operas. Brecht said that "it attacks the society that needs operas of such a sort" and Weill said that it "pays conscious tribute to the irrationality of the operatic form". Both thought operas had become too full of ritual and bereft of substance, and Mahagonny in part sought to deflate the pompous arrogance of traditional opera. With this aim, many traditional operatic themes are subverted and made grotesque; love becomes a commodity, the *deus ex machina* tells everyone to go to hell, the law is run by criminals, etc. A traditional opera theme is true love, but in Mahagonny the closest such thing is the love between Jimmy and the prostitute Jenny. Furthermore, when given the choice to pay off Jimmy's debt and save his life, she tearfully regrets that while she loves him and will miss him dearly, she cannot part with her money. This commodification of love is brought to a grotesque apex after the hurricane spares Mahagonny; the residents now feel free to do what they want, and naturally they want to love. Consequently, in Act 2 scene 3, the largely male population take turns having sex with the prostitutes. In contrast to the supposed theme of love, the scene portrays a perverse form of love; the prostitutes are carted around like giant slabs of meat and the "love" is regimented by the queue of men each waiting impatiently for his own turn. The "Mandalay Song" also heightens the ongoing tension. At no point is the music entirely tonal, and while the tune is seemingly jazzy and carefree, the tonalities betray an uneasiness about the whole business. In Mahagonny, operatic love is mutated from a grand aspiration to a mere commodity.

Another trope of operas is the *deus ex machina*, in which the protagonist is saved at the last minute by divine intervention. This is a useful technique to quickly wrap up a story and make a happy ending, and has been used in drama many times. In Mahagonny, though there are no supernatural occurrences for most of the opera, there is in fact a *deus ex machina*; God himself comes to Mahagonny right before Jimmy is executed. The typical opera would have God solving all the problems just in time for the end of the opera, but Mahagonny's god does not. He does not even acknowledge that Jimmy is tied up and ready to be killed, but at least tries to fix the moral problems in Mahagonny. He tries to convince them to give up their degraded way of life, but the residents all refuse the offer. God then tells them literally to go to hell, but the people are not even offended; they proclaim that they already are in hell so that is no punishment. After fixing nothing, God then lets Jimmy have his say. Jimmy realizes that money did not buy him happiness or freedom, and he has learned his lesson. However, God does not spare him even then, and Jimmy is executed off-stage.

Mahagonny as a city was also intended to be a parable of capitalism stripped of its veneer of bourgeois respectability, as it "arose to meet the needs and desires of the people, and it was these same needs and desires that brought about its destruction". Ultimately, this was also intended as a commentary on the state of Weimar Germany; underneath that facade of prosperity and happiness, lay corruption and savagery. Under Brecht's (and to some extent Weill's) Marxist-influenced view of capitalism, it is created to provide people the goods and services they need, but it does so at the expense of reducing everything to a mere commodity. Furthermore, since obtaining wealth in capitalism is a cutthroat enterprise, the powerful are no better than a gang of bandits, and the law in turn is run by such thugs.

The city of Mahagonny embodies many of these characteristics. Mahagonny was originally created to provide people with useful services; the gold prospectors wanted a relaxation spot, and the three criminals needed to stay there. However, this led to the commodification of everything the tourists desired, especially love. In the end, nobody could buy true happiness; Alaska Wolf Joe and Jacob Schmidt died, the city is burning down, and Jimmy declared before his death that "the happiness I bought was no happiness". His death was also ordered by the court of law, which was run by the three criminals. To make matters even more farcical, they let a murderer bribe his way to freedom while Jimmy is sentenced to death for petty crimes. The parallels between the events of Mahagonny and the Marxist view of capitalism are clear.

To make the comparison more obvious, the opera is set in a pseudo-Wild West America, with Mahagonny itself placed somewhere far from the rest of civilization. America was the land of unbridled capitalism, the frontier just as much so. The only difference is that bourgeois civility and civilization has yet to occupy the frontier, and thus there is no hiding the nature of capitalism beneath the facade of gentlemanly conduct. In Mahagonny, the characters are prostitutes, lumberjacks, criminals, and the like. Not one of them comes from the moneyed class, and yet the same system of exploitation was set up, but in a more naked manner. Instead of seducing a woman's love with power and influence, the residents of Mahagonny pay for a prostitute. But in Mahagonny, poverty is not just a condition the poor bring upon themselves, but a crime to be punished. Thus, Brecht and Weill tried to display capitalism as the meatgrinder they believed it to be.

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LOTTE LENYA

STARS IN

KURT WEILL'S

RISE AND

FALL OF

THE CITY OF

MAHAGONNY

RISE & FALL OF THE CITY OF MAHAGONNY**Opera in 3 Acts - music by Kurt Weill, text by Bertolt Brecht****CD ONE**

- 1 **Act 1** - 1. Steckbrief! (7:28)
- 2 2. Rasch wuchs in den nächsten Wochen eine Stadt auf (4:09)
- 3 3. Die Nachricht von der Gründung einer Paradiesstadt (4:22)
- 4 4. In den nächsten Tagen (2:03)
- 5 5. Damals kam unter anderen auch Jimmy Mahoney (5:06)
- 6 6. Ich habe gelernt (1:55)
- 7 7. Alle großen Unternehmungen (4:55)
- 8 8. Alle wahrhaft Suchenden werden enttäuscht (6:30)
- 9 9. Das ist die ewige Kunst (6:38)
- 10 10. Ein Taifun! (2:23)
- 11 11. In dieser Nacht des Entsetzens (10:49)

CD TWO

- 1 **Act 2** - 12. Hurrikan bewegt sich mit 120 Meilen (4:43)
- 2 13. Von nun an war der Leitspruch (5:05)
- 3 14. Zweitens kommt die Liebe dran! (11:50)
- 4 15. Wir, meine Herren (6:52)
- 5 16. Freunde, kommt (13:27)
- 6 17. Wenn der Himmel hell wird (4:15)
- 7 **Act 3** - 18. Haben alle Zuschauer Billette? (10:31)
- 8 19. Zu dieser Zeit gab es in Mahagonny (4:02)
- 9 20. Hinrichtung und Tod des Jimmy Mahoney (6:52)
- 10 21. Wollt ihr mich denn wirklich hinrichten? (10:31)

Lotte Lenya - Jenny
Gisela Litz - Mrs. Bigbeck
Horst Günter - Trinity Moses
Georg Mund - Pennybank Bill
Fritz Göllnitz - Jake and Tobby
Sigmund Roth - Alaska Joe Wolf
Peter Martwork - Fatty the Bookkeeper

Heinz Sauerbaum - Jimmy Mahoney
Richard Munch - Speaker

North German Radio Chorus, dir. **Max Thurn**
 Orchestra & Chorus conducted by
Wilhelm Brückner-Rüggeberg
 Produced under the supervision of George
 Davis and George Avakian

XR remastering by **Andrew Rose**Transfers from Philips
LPs L 094 18-20LCover artwork based on a
photograph of **Lotte Lenya**
as **Jenny** in the
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Friedrich Ebert Hall, Harburg bei
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