

# THE THREEPENNY OPERA

**Music by Kurt Weill**

**Text by Bertolt Brecht**

**Based on *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay**

**English adaptation by Marc Blitzstein**

## **CONTENTS**

**I. Background**

**II. Characters**

**III. Plot Summary**

**IV. Bio of Kurt Weill**

**V. Historical Context**

**VI. Online Resources**

 **MADISON OPERA**

## I. BACKGROUND



*The Threepenny Opera* is considered one of the most significant works of musical theater created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It catapulted Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht to international fame, was banned by the Nazi's, and has since been translated into 18 languages and performed more than 10,000 times.

The work's origins lay in John Gay's 18<sup>th</sup> century ballad opera, *The Beggar's Opera*. In an early scene, J.J. Peachum, the corrupt controller of beggars, sings this ballad:

“Through all the Employments of Life  
Each Neighbour abuses his Brother;  
Whore and Rogue they call Husband and Wife:  
All Professions be-rogue one another:  
The Priest calls the Lawyer a Cheat,  
The Lawyer be-knaves the Divine:  
And the Statesman, because he's so great,  
Thinks his Trade as honest as mine.”

Endlessly bleak and sarcastic, Gay uses dark humor to illuminate the notion that everyone is cheating everyone else, no matter their social status. Brecht and Weill would cling to this idea, making *The Threepenny Opera* overtly anti-establishment, and thus capturing the turning tides in Weimar-era Berlin. To this day, the work feels dangerous to experience, as it imagines the basest instincts of society and shows us just how close to the surface they stir.

*The Threepenny Opera* premiered in Berlin in 1928. One of Brecht's early attempts at epic theater, it takes an anti-naturalistic approach that aims to make the audience aware that it is experiencing art, often by “breaking the fourth wall” and inspiring social action by disrupting the expectations of simple entertainment. The work is also significant for Weill's score, which fuses Viennese operetta and American jazz to forge a distinctive new style that manages to be both edgy and tuneful.

Madison Opera is presenting Marc Blitzstein's English adaptation of the work, which premiered off-Broadway in 1954. Blitzstein did not attempt a faithful translation of the original German text, but he keeps Weill's music intact, and Brecht himself felt that Blitzstein captured the piece's original intent more accurately than any translation.

## II. THE CHARACTERS

**MACHEATH (“Mack the Knife”)** – London's greatest and most notorious criminal

**J.J. PEACHUM (“The Beggar’s Friend”)** – Controller of all the beggars in London, he conspires to have Mack hanged

**MRS. PEACHUM** – Peachum’s wife, who helps him run the business

**POLLY PEACHUM** – The Peachums’ daughter. After knowing Mack for only five days, she agrees to marry him

**TIGER BROWN** – Police Chief of London and Mack’s best friend from their army days

**LUCY BROWN** – Tiger Brown’s daughter. Also claims to be married to Mack

**JENNY (“Jenny Diver”)** – A prostitute who was romantically involved with Macheath in the past. She is bribed to turn Mack in to the police

**STREET SINGER** – Addresses the audience at the opening and closing of the piece

**FILCH** – The misfit who approaches the Peachums in hopes of beggar training

**MACK’S GANG** – Crookfinger Jake, Bob the Saw, Ready Money Matt, Walt Dreary

**PROSTITUTES** – Betty, Dolly, Molly, and Coaxer

**OTHER CHARACTERS** – Pastor Kimball, Constable, Warden, Messenger



### III. PLOT SUMMARY

Setting: A fair in Soho (London), just before Queen Victoria's coronation.



A street singer appears onstage and sings of the crimes of the notorious criminal Macheath, or “Mack the Knife.” Act I then begins in the shop of J.J. Peachum; he enrolls a new beggar with the help of his wife, and they notice their daughter Polly is missing. A new scene begins, where Macheath is about to marry Polly, as soon as his gang has brought the stolen goods necessary to celebrate. The gang gets nervous when Chief of Police Tiger Brown shows up, but he turns out to be an old army buddy of Mack's. Polly returns home

and announces her marriage, prompting her parents to urge divorce. Mrs. Peachum resolves to bribe Mack's old prostitutes, and learning of his connection to Tiger Brown, she and her husband plot to entrap Mack while meditating on the world's corruption.

Act II begins and Polly tells Mack that her father intends to have him arrested. He plans to leave London, and explains his “business” to Polly so she can run it while he's gone. Polly takes over the gang just as Mrs. Peachum bribes Jenny, Mack's old lover, to turn him in. Leaving the city, Mack decides to visit Jenny. Brown arrives and arrests Mack, who goes to jail but quickly bribes the guard to remove his handcuffs. Lucy Brown, Tiger's daughter and one of Mack's other girlfriends, arrives and declares her love. Polly also shows up, and the girls quarrel. Lucy plots Mack's escape, and when Mr. Peachum finds out, he threatens Tiger Brown, forcing him to send the police after Mack. All reflect on the unpleasant human condition.

At the start of Act III, Jenny goes to the Peachums' to demand her bribe money. Mrs. Peachum refuses, and Jenny accidentally reveals that Mack is at Suky Tawdry's house. Brown arrives, having decided that instead of going after Mack, it would be easier to arrest Mr. Peachum and his beggars, who are plotting to disrupt the coronation parade the next morning. However, Brown discovers the beggars are already in position and only Peachum can stop them. To appease Peachum, Brown must arrest Mack and have him executed. Jenny mourns Mack's plight, and in the next scene, we find him back in jail. He begs his gang to raise a sufficient bribe, but they can't. A parade of visitors enters as Mack prepares to die. Then, a sudden reversal: A messenger announces that Macheath has been pardoned by the Queen and granted a castle *and* pension. The street singer returns again, with the Ballad of Mack the Knife.

## IV. BIOGRAPHY OF KURT WEILL



The son of a cantor, Kurt Weill (1900-1950) was raised in a religious Jewish home in Dessau, Germany. He took an early interest in music; his first teacher was Albert Bing, conductor at the local opera house. At eighteen, Weill went to Berlin, experiencing its political and artistic ferment firsthand. A few months' study with Engelbert Humperdinck did not satisfy him, but late in 1920 he began an intensive association with Ferruccio Busoni in the composition seminar at the Akademie der Künste. By the end of 1923, he had had five full-length works performed in Germany. The next few years brought further success: a popular violin concerto and his first opera, *The Protagonist* (1926, Georg Kaiser). Through Kaiser, Weill met the actress Lotte Lenya in Berlin in 1924, and they married in January 1926. They were divorced from 1933-1937, but they remarried and stayed together until his death.

Weill's early works show the influence of post-romanticism, expressionism, even atonality. Yet the desire to create "freer, lighter, and simpler" music grew on him. The early operas *Royal Palace* (1927) and *The Czar Has his Photograph Taken* (1928) show the influence of jazz and popular music. He began working with Bertolt Brecht in the spring of 1927, setting the "Mahagonny" poems. *Mahagonny's* hummable tunes and thoroughgoing popular influence seemed calculated to shock the avant-garde; the charge that he had "sold out" to commercialism and abandoned art followed him thereafter. Later compositions, like *The Threepenny Opera* and *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* elaborated on his popular style. But a much different style animates other works with Brecht, such as *He Who Says Yes*, an opera for students, and *The Lindbergh Flight*, a cantata.

The collaboration with Brecht ended around 1930, and Weill's last two compositions in Germany were written with others: *The Pledge* (1932, Caspar Neher) and *The Silver Lake* (1933, Georg Kaiser). Hitler's ascent in 1933 forced Weill to leave Germany, never to return. He spent two frustrating years in Paris, finding little sympathy for his new compositions: *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1933, Brecht), *A Kingdom for a Cow* (1935, Robert Vambery), and the *Second Symphony* (1934). His work on *The Eternal Road* (1937, Franz Werfel), a pageant based on the Old Testament, brought him to the U.S. in September 1935.

Weill's American career was as active as his European career. He had two major successes on Broadway: *Lady in the Dark* (1941, Moss Hart and Ira Gershwin) and *One Touch of Venus* (1943, Ogden Nash and S.J. Perelman). His most important works for Broadway, at least in terms of influence, were probably *Street Scene* (1947, Elmer Rice and Langston Hughes) and *Love Life* (1948, Alan Jay Lerner). Weill considered *Street Scene* a "Broadway opera," and his project of making opera more palatable to Broadway audiences was carried forward by Menotti, Blitzstein, and Bernstein. Several experts have pointed to *Love Life* as the precursor of the "concept musical," influencing Fosse, Sondheim, and Kander & Ebb. All together, he brought eight shows to Broadway and saw three other stage works produced in the U.S.

Weill's constant hard work and family history of hypertension caught up with him early in 1950. While his last work, *Lost in the Stars* (1949, Maxwell Anderson), still ran on Broadway, and shortly after he and Anderson had begun a musical version of *Huckleberry Finn*, Weill had a heart attack and was hospitalized in New York City, where he died on April 3.

[Plot Summary and Biography courtesy of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music]

## V. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

**1900** – Birth of Kurt Weill

**1914** – World War I begins

**1917** – Russian Revolution

**1919** – World War I ends; in Germany, democratic Weimar Republic forms with Social Democrats in power, ushering in four years of political crisis

**1923** – Hitler jailed after failed coup; "Golden Age" of Weimar Republic starts; innovative street theater, cabaret, and jazz becoming popular; scientific research thrives

**1925** – Weill's first mature opera, *Der Protagonist*, premieres in Dresden

**1927** – Weill first meets Brecht, and they begin collaboration on *Mahagonny*

**1928** – Berlin premiere of *The Threepenny Opera*

**1929** – Stock market crashes, ushering in Great Depression in US

**1930** – Political shift in Weimar Republic, Chancellors govern through presidential decree rather than consultation with German parliament

**1932** – General elections in Weimar Republic show Nazi gains

**1933** – Hitler sworn in as Chancellor and civil liberties increasingly threatened (January); last public performance of a Kurt Weill work in Germany takes place on March 4 and parliament elections on March 5 are last general vote in Germany for 12 years; passage of Enabling Act on March 24 grants Hitler and his parliament plenary powers, largely viewed as end of Weimar Republic and beginning of Third Reich; Weill flees Berlin for Paris

**1935** – Weill and Lenya arrive in New York, where they attend a rehearsal of *Porgy and Bess*, meets with Marc Blitzstein, and arranges for performances of his works, marking the start of his second career in USA; Germany issues anti-Jewish Nuremberg Laws

**1937** – Marc Blitzstein's pro-union, Brechtian musical *The Cradle Will Rock* premieres in New York amid controversy

**1938** - Weill's first American hit, "September Song" from *Knickerbocker Holiday*; Hitler annexes Austria

**1939** – Beginning of the Holocaust in Germany and Austria as mobs beat, raped, arrested, and murdered Jews on *Kristallnacht*; World War II begins

**1941** – Japanese attack Pearl Harbor; Weill and Ira Gershwin collaboration *Lady in the Dark* premieres, is Weill's first unqualified success on Broadway

**1943** – Weill and Ogden Nash collaboration *One Touch of Venus* on Broadway; Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

**1944** – D-Day; film versions of *Lady in the Dark* and *Knickerbocker Holiday* released

**1945** – FDR dies; Germans surrender and Hitler commits suicide; United Nations founded; U.S. drops atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; first post-war performance of *The Threepenny Opera* in Germany

**1947** – Weill and Langston Hughes collaboration *Street Scene* on Broadway; Weill receives special Tony Award during the first year of the awards

**1949** – China becomes communist; George Orwell publishes *1984*; *Lost in the Stars* is on Broadway

**1950** – Korean War begins, along with McCarthy witch hunt for communists; Weill dies

**1954** - Blitzstein adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* premieres off-Broadway, dividing critics but garnering great popular appeal and securing the work's future in the US

## VI. ONLINE RESOURCES: CLICK / READ / WATCH / LISTEN



Brecht and Weill

### General

- [The Kurt Weill Foundation for Music](#)
- [The Threepenny Opera Website](#)
- [Bertolt Brecht Biography](#)
- [Marc Blitzstein Biography](#)
- [History of \*The Beggar's Opera\*](#)



Lotte Lenya

### Video Samples

- [Original Version of "Mack the Knife"](#)
- [Blitzstein Version of "Mack the Knife"](#)
- [Lotte Lenya sings "Pirate Jenny"](#)
- [Utte Lemper sings "Pirate Jenny"](#)
- [Broadway Revival cast sings "The Army Song"](#)
- [Megan Mullally sings "Barbara Song"](#)



Frank Sinatra

### POpera Connections

- [Louis Armstrong version of "Mack the Knife"](#)
- [Bobby Darin sings "Mack the Knife"](#)
- [Frank Sinatra & Jimmy Buffett sing "Mack the Knife"](#)
- [Michael Buble sings "Mack the Knife"](#)
- [Robbie Williams sings "Mack the Knife"](#)
- [Nina Simone sings "Pirate Jenny"](#)
- [The Doors interpret "Alabama Song"](#)

### Delving Deeper

- [Full Text of John Gay's \*The Beggar's Opera\*](#)
- [The Weimar Republic: Doomed To Fail \[article\]](#)
- [Epic theatre \[Wikipedia\]](#)
- [The 3Penny Opera, 1931 dir. G.W. Pabst \[DVD\]](#)
- [The Threepenny Opera, by Bertolt Brecht, English translation \[Book\]](#)