

STAGE AND SCREEN: KURT WEILL
AND OPERATIC REFORM IN THE 1920S

BRYAN GILLIAM

Few artistic media so closely parallel the rise and fall of the Weimar Republic as German silent film, which began to flourish as a medium of international stature shortly after the November Revolution, reached its zenith within two years of the Treaty of Locarno, and became largely irrelevant (with the advent of talking pictures) by the beginning of the next decade. The German film industry was fairly insignificant before the First World War; the war years saw the creation of various film organizations that would help that industry gain international prominence in the 1920s. A remarkable sense of optimism surrounded German cinema shortly after the war. Young directors, cameramen, and film technicians, who received training creating wartime propaganda films, were eager to achieve prominence in peacetime. Major figures from the realm of live theater would try their hand at this emerging medium. Partly because of its solid organization and partly because of wide-ranging interest from various strata of society, German cinema grew at an exponential rate during the 1920s, despite the economic vicissitudes of the decade. Indeed, in 1927 Germany had produced 241 feature films – more than the rest of Europe combined and a sum rivalled by only the United States and Japan.¹

FILM AND THEATER IN THE 1920S

What role would this young, thriving medium of silent film play in the theatrical life of the early Weimar Republic? In the first few years of the republic – a time of transition from *Hoftheater* to *Staatstheater*, from *Hofoper* to *Staatsoper*, and a time of economic and political instability – the answer was far from clear. Reduced budgets and declining ticket sales created worries for opera directors and producers alike; the steadily increasing popularity of film – which offered visual entertainment at cut-rate prices – and its potential to draw away opera audiences only added to those concerns. Would this burgeoning art form prove to be a formidable rival to opera? Would film ultimately render this venerable genre obsolete?

Berlin music critic Hans Gutman, for one, clearly believed it had, though the blame for decline lay more with outmoded musical institutions than with film

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itself. Recognizing a clear “breach between the public and the art of music,” Gutman found that traditional cultural venues such as symphony concert or opera had ceased to be relevant to audiences. The “usual concert,” according to Gutman, was outmoded because it offered its audience the same works year after year; traditional opera was obsolete because “it doles out material that has become ‘old hat’ to eyes that have gone to school to the cinema and [to] senses disillusioned by reality.”² He recognized film as a positive phenomenon, a catalyst to operatic reform. Arnold Schoenberg was not nearly so charitable. In his brief essay “Gibt es eine Krise der Oper?” he recognized a genuine operatic crisis caused by film: “[Opera] can no longer take the competition of the required realism [of film, which] . . . has spoiled the eyes of the spectator: one not only sees truth and reality, rather also every appearance . . . that presents itself in a fantastic way as reality.”³ Schoenberg’s comments, from 1927, were timely, for by the mid-1920s filmic elements had begun to inform German opera in various ways. But was the attraction of certain opera composers, librettists, and stage directors to film a mere gimmick, an expedient turn towards a growing popular medium, or were there broader underlying factors? Clearly many saw the potential for profit by embracing the world of film, but deeper reasons cannot be ignored.

Film, the product of art, business, and technology, reached a broader public than any other theatrical art form. That general appeal, not surprisingly, attracted those composers associated with *Neue Sachlichkeit*, composers who sought one form of *Gebrauchsmusik* that would engage a larger cultural community. Moreover, the use of film or filmic techniques represented a way in which to purge German opera of its pre-war Wagnerian legacy. Curiously, the first German opera composer who intentionally borrowed cinematic techniques in order to strip opera of its “Wagnerian musical armor” [*Wagnerische Musizierpanzer*] was none other than Richard Strauss.⁴

In composing his autobiographical *Intermezzo* (1916–23), Strauss believed he was developing a new operatic genre that “blazes a path for musical and dramatic composition” for future generations.⁵ He envisioned short, open-ended scenes (which he literally called “cinematic pictures”) that segued or even dissolve into orchestral interludes.⁶ There are no less than thirteen scenes in this two-act opera, which premiered in Dresden (1924); some last no more than three minutes. In the ninety seconds between the first two scenes of the opera, for example, we go from a toboggan slope to a ballroom at a ski-resort inn. Other adjacent scenes take us from an attorney’s office to a storm in the Prater, and then back to the composer’s home. Space and time, thus, were intended to go beyond the staged scene, and Strauss relied on the symphonic interlude to make coherent the often rapid montage technique – a technique informed by film.

Through cinematic techniques Strauss successfully distances himself from Wagner, for surely a major characteristic of Wagnerian opera is its capacity to

expand time. Where a mere glance in *Tristan* can be transformed into a lengthy orchestral passage, film generally aims for temporal compression, where years can become minutes in front of our eyes. Strauss may have failed to shed the Wagnerian “Musizierpanzer” in musical language and style, but his exploitation of innovative dramaturgical techniques that countered such language and style remain one of the most forward-looking and ignored aspects of *Intermezzo*.

By incorporating filmic techniques rather than film itself, however, Strauss avoids this central conflict between opera and cinema: the tension between temporal expansion and compression. How might this dichotomy be resolved if actual film footage played a role in a stage production? The first person to grapple seriously with the problem was Erwin Piscator in the early to mid 1920s. His Berlin productions made extensive use of slide and film projections that formed an integral part of his Marxist, politicized theater. More than anything else, Piscator used film to bring the outside world into the theater. In “Das Theater unserer Zeit,” he observed: “When the theater visitor enters the house, the world should not sink behind him, but open up. . . . The connection between film and stage happens not out of the desire for sensationalism or shock effects, but rather with the intention to make vivid the totality of a political world picture.”⁷

Piscator recognized film and spoken theater as dissimilar but complementary media; the former was denotative, the latter connotative. Film represented “epic black and white art,” while theater embodied the spoken word, the “three-dimensional person.”⁸ Film’s central goal was to thwart the audience’s sense of illusion and to break down the expectations of bourgeois theater. C. D. Innes observed that in the early twenties most German critics viewed film as a realistic medium: “In the Weimar Republic, however, when moving pictures were still a novelty and the harsh lighting needed for primitive photographic equipment demanded absolute verisimilitude, the dominant impression was one of accuracy, and the primary value of the camera as far as Piscator was concerned was that it presented art with a new relationship to reality – a characteristic which was emphasized when film was used in conjunction with the artificial conventions of the stage.”⁹ In short, film – hiding behind an artifice of its own – exposed the artifice of live acting; it undermined subjective preoccupation with the individual on stage.

At first Piscator relied solely on slide projections, which could provide background information or captions projected over each scene. He first used such projections in connection with Alfons Paquet’s *Fahnen* (Flags) of 1924. In this instance the purpose of the headline-like projections, which underscored or explained, was to offset, or undercut, an undeniable melodramatic streak in the play. A year later Piscator used film projection for the first time. In *Trotz Alledem!* (Despite all), historical events are documented from the outbreak of World War One through the deaths of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht: Piscator

projected documentary footage on a screen behind the stage actors. Such footage played the role of running commentary, or visual footnotes, that continuously placed the individual in the appropriate socio-political context. As time went on, Piscator became more sophisticated in his integration of film and theater, sometimes projecting captions, slides, and film simultaneously, all on different screens.

His production of Ernst Toller's *Hoppla! Wir Leben* (Cheers! We're alive) in 1927 was one of his greatest such successes, and it also exemplifies how conflicting tempi in the diegetic time of film vs. theater could be manipulated to a director's advantage. *Hoppla* centers on a political prisoner sentenced to eight years of incarceration. At the beginning we see him in his padded cell; the film screen is essentially an extension of the cell's back wall. Historical events that occurred during his years of confinement are thus projected behind the prisoner and compressed into a matter of minutes: the Treaty of Versailles, the inauguration of the League of Nations, Mussolini marching on Rome, the Munich Beer-Hall Putsch, the Scopes trial, Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic, the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, and so on. Alban Berg exploited film similarly in Act II of *Lulu*, where major events during Lulu's year of imprisonment are compressed into a short silent-film montage. Film cues in the score mention her "Arrest," "Detention," "Trial," "In Prison," and the like. In *Lulu*, as in Piscator's earlier attempts, we see a fluidity of time and space in these film backdrops as we move from event to event and from place to place. Moreover, Berg's decision to make the accompanying film score a musical palindrome corresponds directly to the palindromic aspects of the layout of shots.

Piscator's productions from the early to mid-1920s represented the most innovative type of theater in Berlin, and his successes resonated throughout the Weimar Republic. Despite the strong Marxist flavor, these productions dazzled capitalists as well as communists, and his techniques galvanized a young generation of artists from various fields, not excluding opera. Strauss may have invested *Intermezzo* with undeniable innovations, but at age sixty he was unable to jettison the Wagnerian apparatus that had served him so well in the past. More substantial operatic reform would be achieved by the generation of Hindemith, Weill, and Krenek.

FILM AND OPERATIC REFORM

Krenek was one of many who believed that the greatest flaw in Wagnerian opera was the appropriation of stage action to the opera pit. Strauss merely continued the trend, and even Berg's *Wozzeck* represented more an end than a beginning. Krenek almost sounds like Piscator, or even Brecht, when he refers to Stravinsky's *L'Histoire* as a seminal stage work: "[*L'Histoire*] destroys the fictitious integrity of the stage play by exposing it, as it develops, to the critical searchlight of comment,

through the agency of a ‘reader’ who mediates between the public and the spectacle.”¹⁰ Of course by the time of *L'Histoire* silent-film audiences had already become accustomed to a “reader” of sorts in the guise of the cinematic intertitle, which blocked the flow of the visual narrative with its blacked-out frame and white lettering commenting on the action.

Filmic intertitles resulted from the demand for greater clarity as cinematic plots became more complicated. Around 1907 some film makers and producers even experimented with the use of a narrator or lecturer who would not only explain the plot beforehand but provide commentary during the projection of the film.¹¹ The speaker helped to clarify the narrative and, moreover, also served a didactic purpose: he or she edified the movie-going audience. The edifying function of the narrator was seen to be especially important if, for example, the film were based on a great work of literature.

In *Die neue Oper* (1926) Kurt Weill also commented on the contemporary movement away from Wagnerism.¹² He observed a “purification process” during the years immediately following World War I, a process focussing on “absolute music” – rejecting music drama, program music, and large orchestral works. Opera would have to be discovered all over again, and that rediscovery would be the culmination of a process beginning with purely instrumental music, moving to pantomime, ballet, and ultimately opera. The two most fundamental elements of this reformed opera were a musical autonomy for the orchestra and a return to the stage – as opposed to the opera pit – as the focus for the drama. Weill’s views were largely informed by the musical-dramatic theories of his teacher Busoni, but the student more successfully translated theory into practice.¹³

The opera orchestra, according to Weill, should not simply illustrate stage events but have its own formal and structural integrity.¹⁴ His earliest explorations in music for the theater involved pantomime, for, as Kim Kowalke suggests, “in pantomime and ballet, Weill could circumvent any obligation to illustrate the dramatic events.”¹⁵ Moreover, Weill drew little distinction between music for the stage and that for silent film when addressing this problem of musical autonomy. In an interview of 1927, Weill criticized Edmund Meisel’s silent film score to Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin – Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*. The weakness of the score, according to Weill, is that the music tries to illustrate everything; it uses a “melodramatic means” in a documentary idiom. Weill calls for “an objective, simultaneous *konzertante* film music, an [autonomous] creation under the influence of film and not literal illustration.”¹⁶ If we were to replace the words “film music” with “operatic music” we would have his views on modern opera in a nutshell.

But why the interest in pantomime in early twentieth-century Germany? There was no strong nineteenth-century pantomime tradition in Germany as in France or England. The cultivation of pantomime in early-Weimar Germany

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appears to have stemmed from two major and interrelated phenomena: expressionist theater and silent film. In Berlin, at the beginning of the century, Max Reinhardt raised the role of gesture to an unprecedented level of importance on the German stage. His focus on facial expression and body movement as central dramaturgical tools attracted, among others, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who wrote *Elektra* (1903) with “direct regard” for Reinhardt’s *Kleines Theater*. Reinhardt’s 1910 production of Friedrich Freska’s *Sumurun*, based on the *Tales of the Arabian Nights*, represents a culmination in this respect, for the entire play is performed in pantomime with music by Victor Hollaender. That *Sumurun* was viewed as such a novelty suggests how rare pure pantomime was in early twentieth-century Germany.¹⁷

Reinhardt’s influence on expressionist theater was extensive, affecting directors and playwrights alike. One such playwright (and future Weill collaborator) was Georg Kaiser, regarded as the most prolific expressionist of the early twentieth century. The body of his work evinces a steady process of reducing language to its bare essentials, stripping away articles and pronouns, leaving only the most necessary words that suggest the essence of thought, and relying more and more on wordless gesture. From this perspective, pantomime could be seen as a logical outcome of such a process.

While Kaiser and others infused their works with aspects of pantomime, cinema was in its infancy; from the outset silent film would be informed by mimetic features from the stage. There was, indeed, a pronounced “cross-breeding” between theater and cinema during the post-war years – each medium seemed to feed off the other. Paul Bekker observed this phenomenon in 1919, criticizing cinema for employing conventions of the live stage. But he also stressed that recent theater seemed to be aping aspects of cinema: “[The fact that] the stage-poet has already enlisted the colorful material-delight in cinematic mannerisms as artistic effects in his dramaturgical technique exemplifies a phenomenon such as Kaiser. . . . It indicates a symptom . . . of an aesthetic regrouping- and exchange-process that probably operates deeper than current critics are willing to admit.”¹⁸

The year of Bekker’s criticism also witnessed the greatest example of the synthesis of film and expressionist theater: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a work that exemplifies silent film as the ideal medium for expressionism. It is speechless, it depends entirely upon artificial lighting, it can easily distort visual reality through technical means, and its black and white images allow for stark contrasts. The literature on *Caligari* is vast, and we know that this work influenced not only film, but theater and opera staging; the term “Caligarism” spread throughout Europe shortly after the premiere. Indeed, more than a decade later, Kaiser and Weill still considered the idea of creating a musical version of *Caligari* before settling on *Der Silbersee*.

The mutual influences of screen and stage, including opera and operatic production, were far-reaching. By the mid to late twenties opera houses experimented

with cinematic techniques in new works as well as pieces from the standard repertoire. Certain operas were staged in black and white, some used film projections, others employed cinematic “split-screen” effects. During the 1930–31 opera season in Darmstadt, a production of Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* even imported the intertitles of silent film.¹⁹ Contemporary opera composers such as Weill, Krenek, Hindemith, Max Brand, and others directly or indirectly exploited aspects of cinema. An exploration of each composer’s works would go well beyond the intended scope of this essay, but if we examine one composer – Kurt Weill – and three of his stage pieces (*Der Protagonist*, *Royal Palace*, and *Mahagonny Songspiel*), we can see how a composer assimilated cinematic ideas in various ways: pantomime, film projection, and epic montage techniques. All three elements formed a vital part of Weill’s quest for operatic reform.

KURT WEILL: *DER PROTAGONIST*, *ROYAL PALACE*, AND *MAHAGONNY SONGSPIEL*

Der Protagonist (1925) and *Royal Palace* (1926) represent Weill’s earliest operatic undertakings; both address the problem of nonverbal gesture and music’s relationship to it as a central issue. In the case of *Der Protagonist*, which premiered in Dresden (1926), the nonverbal gesture is pantomime, something that had preoccupied Weill in the early to mid 1920s. Composing for pantomime (or for film), we recall, represented a way for Weill to assert musical autonomy, a way of ensuring the music’s sovereign formal and structural integrity. Not surprisingly, Weill’s first theatrical assay, *Die Zaubernacht* (1922), embraced pure pantomime. Based on a fairy-tale scenario by Vladimir Boritsch, *Die Zaubernacht* was commissioned by a Russian ballet troupe. Weill considered this one-act pantomime to be his first mature work, although, as children’s theater, it would fail to win a broader audience. Despite *Zaubernacht*’s limited appeal, Georg Kaiser was greatly impressed, and soon he and Weill would try their hand at creating a larger-scale, three-act pantomime of their own. But, as Weill confessed, they soon grew weary of “the silence of the figures”; they ultimately realized that they “had to burst the fetters of pantomime: it had to become an opera.”²⁰

The final result was the one-act *Protagonist*, an opera structured around two pantomimes – one comic, the other tragic.²¹ According to the stage directions, the first one is to be “performed entirely balletically and unrealistically, with exaggerated gestures, in contrast to the second pantomime later, which is to be played dramatically throughout, with vivid expression and passionate movements.”²² In the case of both pantomimes the score consists of continuous music with various gestural cues, although the comic one involves ensemble vocalizing toward the end.

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The comic pantomime offers a light-hearted treatment of marital infidelity: “On the left the Wife (2nd player) turns back and entices her husband (the Protagonist) to her with languishing gestures [mm. 3–6]. Eventually the Husband comes and reluctantly accepts her caresses [mm. 12–13]. Then he gives her to understand that he must go out again [19–20]. At this the Wife becomes extremely desperate [m. 22] but finally calms down [m. 26] . . .” Soon the Wife catches her husband in the street serenading another woman sitting at a window. To keep his wife preoccupied, the Husband sends a monk up to spend time with his wife: “From here on, gradually intensifying loveplay. Opposite the Monk and the Wife are similarly occupied [mm. 167–70] . . .”

The second pantomime offers parallel events, but viewed through an expressionistic lens: “On the left the second player, as the Wife, gazes longingly into the street [mm. 3–4]: suddenly she sits up stiffly, because she thinks herself observed [mm. 7–9] – then again cautiously leans out of the window [mm. 12–14]. At once her husband (the Protagonist) appears and assails her with caresses: the Wife resists wearily [mm. 16–17]. The Husband becomes more pressing [m. 22], the Wife increasingly cold and distant [mm. 24–25]. He begins to weep; she mocks him [mm. 31–32]; he begs her on his knees; she pretends to be sleepy [mm. 34–35] . . .”

Afterwards the Husband rushes out to the street where he notices a young woman who takes pity on him, and they make love. But from her window the Husband sees a gentleman enter his wife’s dwelling, where they, too, make love. Filled with rage, the Husband rushes back to his home and beats on the door. His rage becomes so pronounced that he is unable to distinguish between his character and his own personality: “This confusion is so upsetting that both players do not know how to go on with the sketch [mm. 160–61] . . .” This expressionistic turn of events continues through the end of the opera, when the Protagonist – having lost all his senses – ends up stabbing his own sister when she tells him that she soon will be married.

Though one cannot say with assurance that these pantomimes were directly influenced by silent film, one can state with confidence that “eyes that ha[d] gone to school to the cinema” did not fail to note their filmic aspects, especially in the tragic, quasi-expressionistic pantomime, where we reach the border of insanity. Hans-Werner Heister finds “Caligari-irrationalism” to be a prevailing context.²³ One critic who attended the premiere of *Der Protagonist*, in fact, expressed a certain weariness with the current emphasis on pantomime, and he squarely blamed cinema: “We have long witnessed the commercialization of mime; even longer the discovery of the film actor, of which this Protagonist reminds us a bit.”²⁴

Royal Palace, which premiered in Berlin (1927), crosses the border into silent film itself – as one of three surrealist “visions.” Three suitors compete for the

favors of the enchanting Dejanira. The first, her husband, promises “the wealthy continent,” and in a film fantasy we see her “in Nice, in a Pullman to Constantinople, at a ball, at the Russian ballet, flying to the North Pole, etc.” The second (“Yesterday’s Lover”) offers “the heavens of our nights,” and an astrological ballet ensues, capped off by an exotic off-stage vocal duet. “Tomorrow’s lover” bestows nothing less than “eternal nature,” and in a second fantastic choreography we go from seascape to landscape, where Orpheus himself appears with various natural creatures.

Jazz-like elements, latent in *Der Protagonist*, rise to the surface in *Royal Palace*. Sharp syncopations, evident throughout *Der Protagonist*, now take on a distinct ragtime or foxtrot flavor; the saxophone is featured for the first time in an opera of Weill. In *Royal Palace* these two elements – popular dance rhythms and jazz-like timbres – initially coalesce in the music for the film fantasy, Weill’s first attempt at silent-film scoring. After the Husband exclaims, “Ich schenke dir den reichen Kontinent,” we hear the anapæstic beep of an automobile horn, which punctuates a ten-bar orchestral passage (based on that rhythm) only to be interrupted by the sound of a honky-tonk piano – a clear homage to the silent-film piano player.²⁵ Weill would have probably indicated “Foxtrot-Tempo” in a later context, but here it is simply *Allegro un poco tenuto*. Accented by wood block, snare drum, cymbal, and trumpet, the piano soon becomes the syncopated, rhythmic background for a lyrical melody in the saxophone, a sound and a rhythm that seem to foreshadow moments in *Die Dreigroschenoper* (see Example 1.1).

Example 1.1

Royal Palace: Film Music



Die Dreigroschenoper: “Zuhälterballade”

Die Dreigroschenoper: “Kanonen-Song”

Die Dreigroschenoper: “Ballade vom angenehmen Leben”

This film-music sequence marks Weill’s first overt reference to American popular music in a stage work.

Krenek’s *Jonny spielt auf*, another opera significantly informed by filmic techniques, premiered in Leipzig (1927) only a few weeks before *Royal Palace*. In

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reviewing both works, Paul Stefan observed that with *Jonny* “Krenek offers the magic of rapidly changing scenes, which come from film; Weill imports these [filmic elements] directly: *Royal Palace* is, in this sense, probably the first film opera.”²⁶ But another critic, Siegfried Günther, asserted that in *Royal Palace* cinematic aspects went beyond the mere incorporation of film, and he surely had those pantomimic “visions” in mind: “Everywhere we notice attempts to construct in a series of closed pictures that have optical roundness and, as a result, are subordinate to filmic laws.”²⁷

The full score was never published, and both the autograph and the film sequence are lost. But the published piano-vocal score contains a wealth of orchestral indications, and it also provides visual cues for the film sequence, which exhibits a decided fluidity of time and space, though hardly along Piscatorian lines. The surrealistic *Royal Palace* film scene is anything but epic; it does not challenge fantasy, but retreats into it.²⁸ Thus, we come to a fundamental contradiction: on the one hand, film can be viewed as a realistic medium, able to break the illusion of theater. On the other hand, film is ultimately nothing but illusion, a series of two-dimensional still images on celluloid. This paradox, we recall, was the source of Schoenberg’s criticism, which was that in film “one not only sees truth and reality, rather also every appearance . . . that presents itself in a fantastic way as reality.”

This problem, pointed out by Schoenberg, may have been one reason that Brecht, whose epic-theatrical works were largely indebted to film, never exploited the actual cinematic apparatus in his staging. Brecht’s fascination with low forms of entertainment, including film, is well known, and he probably relished the fact that film, unlike theater, made no attempt to hide its commodity status. From the teens onward, Brecht was intrigued by detective movies and, later, imported American gangster films, generally set in some corrupt urban setting.²⁹ His admiration for Eisenstein’s technique of dialectical montage is well documented, as is his preference for Chaplin’s less emotional, more objective and light-hearted style of social criticism in such films as *The Gold Rush*, which exposes capitalism in its most naked form. With his sure sense of timing, gesture, and humor Chaplin manages to reveal a grim human condition without Eisenstein’s melodrama.

But Brecht’s involvement with film went well beyond the status of spectator. He, of course, learned much about the relationship between film and theater during his period with the Piscator-Bühne, which began in 1927 – the year of *Hoppla! Wir Leben*. But even before that – in the early twenties – Brecht tried his hand at writing full-length silent-film treatments, none of which were ever produced; John Willett stresses the importance of that experience for his later career.³⁰ One no doubt finds the seeds of Brecht’s epic theater in those film scripts. In writing a silent screenplay, Brecht had to work within a format of successive linear