

## NONESUCH KURT WEILL

Weill: Cello Sonata/Dohnanyi: Cello Sonata, op. 8 (D-79016)  
Teresa Stratas: The Unknown Kurt Weill (D-79019)

Kurt Weill, as American audiences are becoming aware, did more than write the music for such American classics as "September Song" and "Speak Low"; he did more than escape from Germany after the Nazis condemned The Threepenny Opera, more than arrive in New York and write Broadway musicals. Before, during and after all that he composed music in many forms. These two digital releases from Nonesuch present new evidence of this "other side" of Kurt Weill.

I have used quotes in the sentence above because to Weill and his enthusiasts there is no "other side" to the man. He was a composer. His musical thoughts were expressed by him in the most appropriate forms and unlike his other colleagues in the Broadway circus, Weill wrote his music fully, his "orchestrations" were his own, his trademark, his sound.

The Cello Sonata is one of the few surviving compositions of Weill's prolific period before he began to study with Ferruccio Busoni in 1921. It is a work in three movements, Allegro ma non troppo, Andante espressivo, Allegro assai: Wild bewegt grotesk vorzutragen. Considered an experimental work by many critics of Weill's work, it is nonetheless central to his development. There is already a strong personal use of melody over driving rhythmic accompaniment which recurs in many of his later works, particularly in the Four Walt Whitman Songs and the folk-opera Down in the Valley.

The second movement is particularly strong in its overlapping tonalities. Very much a mood piece which seems to almost ache for a resolution, its ultimate romanticism wins out over all other elements. The violin-like upper registers of the cello are used briefly to establish the romantic yearning and then disappear as the stronger tones of the cello return to lull us along into a sense of security. Then, without warning, passion enters the music for a moment. Weill juggles emotions musically in this section and does so expertly.

The third movement echoes other Weill works, in particular the Second Symphony, not written until Weill's exile years in Paris, around 1933/34. It is a wonderful and varied piece and requires clever and virtuosic playing. Jerry Grossman meets the challenge. I heard him perform this piece in a recital at Abraham Goodman House in New York; Lenya, Weill's widow, was next to me and we talked about the performance and the piece at that time. I hadn't liked Mr. Grossman's playing at all, finding him weak in places which required more feeling, more expression, more attention to the music's particular message. Those faults are gone in this recording. He plays magnificently. Diane Walsh is easily his equal and they make a dynamite pair for this work.

The sound quality is excellent. Clean, no room echo or distortion, clarity beyond belief. Every note, every heavy breath Mr. Grossman grabs in the first movement is there. I liked it very much.

The Dohnanyi piece on the second side of the disc is also very well played. There is no reason why either of these showy pieces should ever be out of plain hearing again.

Teresa Stratas seems to be making her name these days in modern repertory. Richard Strauss' Salome, Alban Berg's Lulu and Kurt Weill's Jenny are her three most easily remembered operatic heroines. Her voice is well suited to these roles and she has a body which can only be described as a "knock-out." But there is a sadness in her eyes, a worldly attitude in the movements of her body which would act against her image in such pieces as La Traviata or Lucia di Lammermoor. She is a modern and belongs to that world pioneered by Puccini and Mascagni and Leoncavallo and Korngold and Weill. For her first solo album she has chosen to present 14 songs, concert arias and odd pieces by Kurt Weill. It is appropriate.

In early 1980 Miss Stratas gave a recital at the Whitney Museum of obscure Weill songs and that concert led to this album. She had recently scored a major international success with the opera Mahagonny at the Metropolitan, her telecast being seen around the globe. She had almost swept away the image of Lotte Lenya in the same role which most of us had from the Columbia recording of the late fifties (produced by Goddard Lieberson). Stratas was a natural to introduce these delectable ditties.

Most of the songs from Weill's European years had been overlooked or ignored in the early thrust to revive interest in the man and his works. This collection goes back as far as 1925 to a little folk-like ditty, "Klops-Lied (Meatball Song)" and includes such oddities as "Berlin im Licht-Song" written to celebrate a 1928 City-of-Light festival, two French concert arias; "Youkali: Tango-Habanera" and "Complainte de la Seine", "Es Regnet" with a text by Jean Cocteau, "Buddy on the Night-shift" with lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II (and two different musical settings) and various songs Weill wrote as incidental pieces for plays during the late 20s and early 30s.

Two of the songs were performed and privately recorded by Lotte Lenya and Kurt Weill during World War II. "Wie Lange Noch?" and "Und Was Bekam Des Soldaten Weib?" are both scathing condemnations of war, the former with a text by Walter Mehring, the latter by Bertoldt Brecht. These were the only pieces performed publicly by the composer and his wife and their recordings of the two songs are extremely moving. Ms. Stratas performs them with great strength and emotional impact. She does the same for "Die Muschel Von Margate", imparting to it an other-worldly importance as she stretches and strains the voice crying out the credo of the greedy, oil-hungry developers: "Shell! Shell! Shell!"

You can't help listening for clues, in the early songs, of things to come. Weill was notorious for using and reusing bits of both melody and accompaniment when it suited his purposes. "Youkali" contains major foreshadows of the main themes of "The Song of the Goddess" from Johnny Johnson as well as thematic materials from "Railroads on Parade" and "A Kingdom for a Cow". The entirety of "Wie Lange Noch?" is used once again by Weill for the French blues "Je Ne T'Aime Pas" (actually written some years earlier). It is one of Miss Stratas' most effective pieces.

Without a doubt my two favorite selections on this album are "Nanna's Lied" and "Buddy on the Nightshift". "Buddy" was written to be performed in the Lunchtime Follies, entertainment designed for war-industry workers. The song is a Broadway lullaby with a certain cleverness lyrically, but it is Miss Stratas who shines here as the central genius. She pulls back the fuller, more operatic quality of her voice and becomes a pop singer of great strength and potential. Weill has set the lyric twice and the arrangement by pianist Richard Woitach has given Stratas a chance to sing both. The first is in C and more melodic, the second is in E-flat and slightly more strident. It's a curious look at the composer's special ear.

"Nanna's Lied" was written for Lenya as a special gift for Christmas (or her birthday, the story varies) in 1939. This is, officially, its first recording although I have loved the song for years in a French translation sung on a Weill album by Catherine Sauvage (Epic LC 3489). It is a tender, poetic piece with a lyric by Brecht with a cry and a gasp at the end, "Where are the tears of last night? Where are the snows of years gone by?" Miss Stratas asks these questions three times in the course of the song and each time I hear the questions asked by her, by Sauvage, by Lenya, Brecht, Weill and hundreds of thousands of people, lost, alone, confused. This is great art; Weill at his best. This is great art; Stratas at her finest. She understands that a song's lyrics mean more than the open-vowel sounds some singers prefer to affect as they ping on every note. She gives each song more than it would have been given by a lesser singer, even a singer of greater stature than Ms. Stratas currently enjoys. But if this is an example of what to expect from Teresa Stratas in the future, she should be the greatest of them all. She knows no bounds in the modern repertoire.

BRAVA! Stratas!! Echo Weill!!

J. Peter Bergman