

IN

## *Writing in Chalk: Brecht and Weill*

Can Benjamin's ideas be relevant in the process of making art? I hope so. As I have said, the forms that Benjamin is *demonstrating or performing* through his own writing are the same forms that he identifies in other works, including works of art. Through examples of allegory and constellation we can trace these forms. Even if it is difficult to work directly with these forms, due to their anti-representational nature as "anti-concepts", I have found working critically through examples of allegory and constellation to be helpful to my own work. While it is tempting to explore here the figure of Franz Kafka, whose use of *insignia* is very close to Benjamin's melancholy dialectical image (and close to my musical setting of "signatures" in "Number 8" of *Det Ryker fortsatt*), I think that it would be more effective for the purposes of this document if we went straight to musical/theatrical examples of allegory.

I would like to begin this more "practical" conclusion with the figures of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, before looking at the work of Luigi Nono. Much research has been done upon the relationship between Brecht and Benjamin, but Walter Benjamin was also friends with the composer Kurt Weill and the two spent time together in both Germany in France.<sup>53</sup> And so, even though other scholars have not examined their relationship thoroughly, I believe that it is very much worth investigating the music of Weill in terms of the ideas of Benjamin, especially the music from his collaborations with Bertolt Brecht.

Benjamin was initially attracted to Brecht and Weill because he saw many of his theoretical ideas embodied in their theater. Central to this was their rejection of Wagnerian tragedy. As Stanley Mitchell writes in *Understanding Brecht*, "Brecht's drama is a deliberate unseating of the supremacy of tragedy and tragic inevitability... Echoing his own 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Benjamin comments: 'It can happen this way, but it can also happen quite a different way'"<sup>54</sup>. Benjamin writes that Brechtian Epic Theater operates under the *refusal* of Aristotelian Catharsis. The audience should not believe in the character's fate, and should

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<sup>53</sup> Benjamin's friendship with Weill is noted in several biographical sources, and their conversations are mentioned in Benjamin's work on popular culture, such as the 1931 piece "Mickey Mouse".

<sup>54</sup> Mitchell, Stanley. "Introduction to *Understanding Brecht*". In *Understanding Brecht*, by Walter Benjamin. London: Verso, 1998. p. xii.

question if the story presented on the stage “must be that way”. This desire for an “active” audience is also a theme in Weill’s thoughts about music. Weill conceived two types of music: “*Verbrauchsmusik*,” or music to be used up” and “*Gebrauchsmusik*,” music that is useful. Weill wanted to write *Gebrauchsmusik*. Rather than overwhelming audiences with emotion and wanting them to identify with the emotion of the characters, Weill wanted his music to be considered critically, thus stressing simplicity, irony, and external references. Weill wanted his music to inspire thought and be useful to the listener beyond the moment in which it was heard.

Weill and Brecht’s work shouldn’t be viewed in terms of simple metaphor or symbol. Rather, Brecht-Weill’s theater is truly allegorical in a Benjaminian sense, meaning that the never ending referential gesture is always more important than the symbol or signified itself. The reference is a gesture, never a statement of judgement or truth. Stanley Mitchell describes Brechtian allegory as a process by which “...critical intelligence intervenes to comment upon the representation, in other words where the representation is never complete in itself, but is openly and continually compared with the life represented...”.<sup>55</sup>

Instead of having characters with who are concrete personages, Brecht/Weill’s characters are *types*. If they have names, like Mackie Messer or Leokadja Begbick, they are merely placeholders, and the characters can switch roles or personalities. I can mention here that this was a topic of discussion in the creation of a second libretto for our opera about the Commune. In the old libretto, there were Brechtian types, and even characters used in Brecht’s *Die Tage*, but we eventually decided to go even further, as Brecht and Weill themselves do on a number of occasions and remove all character names. Those who appear on stage are truly “types” in the purest sense – the mother, the editor, the soldier.

While of Brecht’s and Weill’s works do not often focus on death, the form of allegory that they use is certainly “tolerant” of death. In fact, I would argue that Weill’s *Gebrauchsmusik*, or “music that can be useful”, is more likely to be tolerant of death as it is – perhaps surprisingly not written with objective or intent, unlike commemorative music. I must add, to avoid confusion, that Weill’s *Gebrauchsmusik*, and his ideas about the genre, were quite different from those of other composers, like Paul Hindemith. Weill defined *Gebrauchsmusik* as music that “*can* be useful”. This does not mean that it is “occasional”. Rather, it means that it is open and

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. xiii

does not force itself upon its subjects. Weill began with the question: “is what we do useful to the general public?”<sup>56</sup>, asking about the potential usefulness of a work in a *general* sense, rather than a particular sense. Furthermore, Weill compares this music to *Verbrauchsmusik* music to be ‘used up—’ implying that music with a *particular* use is undesirable, and possibly even inherently capitalist. Instead of having a particular use or function, musicologist Stephen Hinton writes that Weill wanted to *provoke* with *Gebrauchsmusik*, trying to inspire general thought and action as opposed to *enticing* a certain response or emotion.<sup>57</sup>

Weill’s *Das Berliner Requiem* with text by Brecht, focuses on death, but rather than merely being “occasional”, this music is also intensely political. Through this piece, Weill demonstrates clearly that these forms, *Gebrauchsmusik* and *allegory* are not merely compatible, but overlap greatly. *Das Berliner Requiem* is pompous in style, but in a seemingly ironical way. The orchestration, (2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 alto saxophones, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, timpani, percussion, organ (harmonium), guitar, banjo, and male vocalists) is reminiscent to the classical genre of requiem (with trombones and organ). However, the lack of strings and high voices makes it clear from the beginning that the work is unsentimental. In fact, the work is almost always devoid of sustained notes. The exception is the first half of the 5th movement: a recitative with church organ. This is the “exception which proves the rule”: the organ never ceases to play long sustained chords backing an exaggerated “Bachian” recitative. Indeed, the contrast that this movement provides serves to underline the barren nature of the rest of the piece, from which the organ is strangely absent. While Weill evokes Bach and Mozart, he simultaneously uses irony and exaggeration to distance us from them. Even the “barren” nature of the accompaniment can be viewed as a Brechtian/Benjaminian “*Verfremdungseffekt*”, or “distancing effect”, which separates symbols of their original semiotic content so that they can be heard or viewed objectively by the audience. A figure repeated in silence, though still emotional, becomes an object that the listener can contemplate. Instead of a magnificent organ which surrounds the listener with the glory of God in the face of death, Weill’s listener gains an ironical distance, whereby the organ may sound insufficient, cold, or even funny.

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<sup>56</sup> Marx, Wolfgang. “Brecht and Weill’s ‘Berliner Requiem’ as a Necropolitical Statement”. *Who Telleth a Tale of Unspeaking Death?* Dublin Death Studies 2, ed. Wolfgang Marx, 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

The use of instruments in a single movement is a theme in this piece. Weill only uses guitar in the second movement (“Ballade vom ertunkenen Mädchen”) and the banjo is featured in the third movement alone (“Marterl”). This gives a fragmented, disjointed feeling to the work, which is also repetitive both within individual movements, and across them, with the last movement repeating. This traumatic condition, characterized by a simultaneous fragmentation and repetition, is evocative of the Baroque lament that we discussed in the previous section. I would like to again highlight the barren nature of the accompaniment. Not only is acapella singing a norm, but the focal use of non-sustained string instruments like guitar and banjo cements the groundless feeling of the piece. Indeed, the second movement, about a nameless dead girl floating in the water, is truly groundless.

**Lento**

*tutti p*

**Tenori** Als sie er-trun-ken war und hin-un-ter -

**Baritoni** Als sie er-trun-ken war und hin-un-ter -

**Bassi** Als sie er-trun-ken war und hin-un-ter -

**Chitarra** *p*

**Ten.** schwamm von den Bä-chen in die grö-ße-ren Flüs-se,

**Bar.** schwamm von den Bä-chen in die grö-ße-ren Flüs-se,

**Bassi** schwamm von den Bä-chen in die grö-ße-ren Flüs-se,

**Chit.** *Am7 C7*

(aufrecht)

Figure 4: “Ballade vom ertunkenen Mädchen” mm. 1-6

31

Tenn. *erst ihr Ge-sicht, dann die Hän-de und zu - letzt erst ihr Haar. Dann ward sie Flas in Flüs-sen mit*

Bar. *erst ihr Ge-sicht, dann die Hän-de und zu - letzt erst ihr Haar. Dann ward sie Flas in Flüs-sen mit*

Bassi *erst ihr Ge-sicht, dann die Hän-de und zu - letzt erst ihr Haar. Dann ward sie Flas in Flüs-sen mit*

Chit.

34

Tenn. *vie - - - - - lem Flas.*

Bar. *vie - - - - - lem Flas.*

Bassi *vie - - - - - lem Flas.*

Chit.

Handwritten annotations: *E7* (red), *G#m* (red), *G#m* (blue), *Dm* (blue)

Figure 5: "Ballade vom ertrunkenen Mädchen" mm. 31-37

This movement contains no root position chords (see *Figure 4*), until a seemingly random D minor chord at the end of an otherwise E minor tonality movement, which further emphasizes the "groundless" feeling through its arbitrariness (see *Figure 5*).

Barrenness, fragmentation, repetition and namelessness. We have seen these elements in our discussion of allegory and lament thus far, and indeed the "Ballade vom ertrunkenen Mädchen" is a lamentation in the purest sense. But this does not mean that this is not a political work. On a topical level, this movement deals with the death of communist leader Rosa Luxemburg, or to be more specific, the figure of the drowned girl stems from the memory of Rosa Luxemburg: Brecht's poem "Vom ertrunkenen Mädchen", originally written in 1920, was dedicated to Luxemburg, who was murdered by the paramilitary fascist Freikorps in 1919 and dumped in the Landwehr Canal to be found months later, her body grossly decomposed.

Unlike other glorifications which commemorate her memory, this artistic treatment focuses on *loss*. This movement is about the loss of human identity that occurs in death. And so while we can extrapolate beyond the work and the allegory to find a real “Rosa Luxemburg”, within this work, not only has she lost her name, but she has lost her face. Literally, in the text it has rotten off, and the body is no longer her:

Als ihr bleicher Leib im Wasser verfaulet war  
Geschah es (sehr langsam), dass Gott sie allmählich vergass  
Erst ihr Gesicht, dann die Hände und ganz zuletzt erst ihr Haar.  
Dann ward sie Aas in Flüssen mit vielem Aas.

[As her pale body lay foul in the water  
She was forgotten (very slowly) by God himself  
First her face, then her hands and, last but not least, her hair.  
She became rot in a river full of rot]<sup>58</sup>

And so, while the figure of Rosa Luxemburg is present, *it is present as the figure of her loss*, the figure of her dissolution. Weill’s chord progressions demonstrates the allegorical process: ever repeating, breaking down, and cycling back upon itself, like a corpse in a flowing river, stuck in the weeds. When we find this body and pull it out of the water, it has transformed into the totally unfamiliar D minor.

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<sup>58</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. In Kurt Weill’s *Das Berliner Requiem*. ed. David Drew. Vienna: Universal Edition, 1987.