

Notes on the Program
by James Bagwell

The three composers heard on this concert, Béla Bartók (1881-1945), Paul Hindemith (1895-1963), and Kurt Weill (1900-1950) were part of the wave of immigrant European composers that fled to the United States just prior to World War II. Each composer made a significant impact on the evolution of American music in a variety of areas, including musicology, early music performance, the teaching of composition, and the shaping of contemporary musical theatre. What had been developing artistically in the United States was suddenly shifted and altered by immigrant composers with serious artistic reputations in Europe.

Bartók, who arrived in New York in 1940, did pioneering work in ethnomusicology in Hungary, and continued his efforts at Harvard University. There he worked on the Parry collection, which contained some 2,600 discs of Hungarian folk music, not yet organized and classified. His carefully detailed transcriptions are still in use today, and are the standard-bearer in the notation of folk music. In 1934 the Nazis launched a campaign against Hindemith as a result of his anti-Nazi views, which he expressed openly to his composition class in Berlin. This campaign was based on his association with atonal composers, the supposed immorality of his one-act operas, and, in particular, his association with Jewish musicians. He finally arrived in the United States in 1940, and began teaching at Yale University in 1941. During this time he became one of the most influential and demanding composition teachers in the United States; he only awarded 12 master's degrees in composition during his 12 years of teaching there. In addition, he championed medieval and Renaissance music, establishing one of this country's first ensembles to perform on period instruments. Weill came to New York in 1935 to supervise *Der Weg der Verheissung* ('The Eternal Road'), an enormous theatrical spectacle recounting the history of the Jewish people as told by a rabbi to his community at a time of persecution. During that period he also collaborated with The Group Theatre on the anti-war musical play *Johnny Johnson*. Although *Johnny Johnson* was not entirely successful, Weill eventually enjoyed other Broadway successes, especially *Lady in the Dark*. Virgil Thomson, in his obituary of Weill, wrote that every one of his Broadway shows was "a new model, a new shape, a new solution of dramatic problems."

In a 1946 lecture, **Béla Bartók's** friend and colleague Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967) recalling the women's and children's choruses, said that "From 1925 onwards, I repeatedly urged him to write choruses. He never wrote any until, some ten years later, he came forward with a whole bunch of them." Bartók's inspiration came from his work with folk music at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1934. He was examining volumes of the *Collection of Hungarian Folk Poetry*, which contained only the words of the folk songs. Interestingly, he chose texts whose melodies he did not know, and composed new music which contained elements of the folk melodies that he had been recording and transcribing. In all, he composed 27 **Choruses** from 1935 to 1936, which he then organized into little cycles, or suites, each containing three or four songs. The first performance was in Kecskemét on April 18, 1937. The women of the Dessoff Choirs will perform cycles III and VI in Hungarian.

Cycle III consists of four short songs arranged for soprano and alto voices; cycle VI is arranged for three parts and contains three songs. Although no song is longer than two or three minutes, each is rich in musical detail. Kodály has suggested that Bartók may have received some inspiration from studying a book on the composition style of the Renaissance composer Palestrina. Although melodically there is no relationship between these folk songs and the music of Palestrina, Bartók does compose in a similar contrapuntal, imitative style native to Renaissance composers. This can be heard in the first song in cycle III, *Ne menj el!* ('Don't Leave Me'), and in the first song in cycle VI, *Keserves* ('Grief'). Bartók is particularly attuned to the tendency in the Hungarian language to accent the first syllable of a word; this is especially evident in *Senkim a*

világon ('I've no one in the world') from cycle III. Finally, in the song *Cipósütés* ('Baking Bread'), he explores the sounds of crickets, fleas, and hens through both linguistic and musical onomatopoeia.

During the 1947 Symposium on Music Criticism at Harvard University, Robert Shaw premiered a number of new choral works, including Aaron Copland's *In the Beginning* and **Paul Hindemith's** *Apparebit repentina dies*. Written for mixed chorus and ten brass instruments, *Apparebit* stands as one of the more riveting choral works from the first half of the 20th century. The text is a medieval forerunner of the *Dies Irae* text used in the Catholic Requiem Mass. Taking much of its substance from a paraphrase of *Matthew 25:31-46*, the *Apparebit* was probably written between 400 and 700 AD, and appears in the *Oxford Book of Medieval Verse*. The poem is constructed as an ingenious acrostic and written in couplets, each beginning with successive letters of the 23-character Latin alphabet.

Apparebit repentina dies is set in four movements. The first ferociously warns of the horrifying consequences of the Day of Judgment. The second movement alternates between the women singing a chorale and the tenors and basses in recitative style. This frames a dialogue in which the great Judge separates the righteous from the unrighteous. The beginning of the third movement describes the unjust being swept back into hellfire; the baying of Cerberus (the three-headed hound of Hades) at Hell's gates is more than suggested by the four French horns. At the moment when possible redemption for the faithful is suggested, Hindemith employs one of his most beautiful melodies in a passacaglia, an imitative form used frequently in Baroque music. The melody begins in the brass and emanates into each section in the chorus, leading ultimately to a jubilant E-flat major conclusion. The brief final movement is a chorale suggesting an homage to Johann Sebastian Bach. With this beautifully harmonized finale, once again Hindemith reflects back to an older compositional structure.

Kurt Weill composed *Das Berliner Requiem* in Berlin during November and December 1928. This work was one of a number of pieces commissioned from leading composers (including Hindemith) by the *Reichsrundfunkgesellschaft*, which was the controlling body of regional radio stations throughout Germany at that time. The texts were written by Weill's frequent collaborator Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), and the first performance was heard on Frankfurt Radio on May 22, 1929.

Das Berliner Requiem, scored for clarinets, saxophones, bassoon, brass, percussion, banjo, and harmonium, uses only male voices throughout, and is not a requiem in the conventional sense of the word. This secular work is, as described by Pascal Huynh, an "assembly of commemorative tablets, epitaphs, and funeral songs which represent the feelings of the widest levels of the population." The opening and closing chorus, the *Großer Dankchoral* ('Great Hymn of Thanksgiving') with its harsh rhythmic writing for the chorus, sets off the grave and cynical tone of the work. The *Ballade vom ertrunkenen Mädchen* ('Ballad of a Drowned Girl') is accompanied by the guitar and sung by the chorus in an almost hymn-like fashion. The third movement, *Marterl* ('Epitaph'), for solo tenor, is highly characteristic of the Weill-Brecht musical idiom: slow dance rhythm, a melody in the saxophone, and a stark uniform accompaniment. This section is followed by *Erster Bericht über den unbekanntes Soldaten* and *Zweiter Bericht* (the 'First' and 'Second Report on the Unknown Soldier'). The first 'report' is sung by the men's chorus and the tenor soloist in a jagged militaristic style; the second is in a recitative-like manner sung by the baritone soloist and sparsely accompanied by the harmonium.

The unaccompanied chorus movement, *Zu Potsdam unter den Eichen* ('To Potsdam under the Oaks'), is included in this performance at the suggestion of David Drew, a leading Weill scholar. This movement, which was left out of the 1967 critical edition of *Das Berliner Requiem*, is described in a memorandum written to me by Mr. Drew. I am grateful for his assistance and suggestions:

The 1967 edition was based on the available materials and current research. It was designed to offer a solution to the structural problems resulting from the fact that the composer had never finalized his plans for revisions after the Requiem's first performance. His decision to remove one of the numbers and expand it as the conclusion of his *Mahagonny* opera had consequences for the Requiem as a whole, as did his original decision to remove the stylistically alien *Vom Tod im Wald* solo, which had been the opening number until shortly before the premiere.

The 1967 edition was always tentative in principle. In due course, intensive research in Germany and elsewhere uncovered new facts about the first performance in 1929 and especially about the censorship of the number *Zu Potsdam unter den Eichen* – of which Weill's original score and all the performance material is lost. Towards the end of the 1990s, David Drew discussed with the Kurt Weill Foundation the idea of a new version of the Requiem, incorporating the 'Potsdam' number in the composer's own arrangement for male chorus *a cappella*, and squarely confronting the fact that the transmitted work is a torso.

Weill, with his use of Brecht's texts, directly confronts the horror of World War I, and seems to anticipate what was coming next in the geo-political horizon. While Weill was using a more avant-garde theatrical style—one can almost smell the interior of the cabarets in Weimar Germany—Bartók reflects a nostalgic nationalism associated with the late 19th century, a decisive movement that attempted to establish national identity through music. Perhaps Hindemith was expressing a certain anxiety about the future, connecting to the distant past by setting an 8th-century text using 18th-century musical techniques. The unsettled times that resulted in World War II produced a considerable amount of important music, music that impacted the artistic landscape of the United States, and submerged, for good or bad, the beginnings of a distinctive American musical style.

© 2007 by James Bagwell