



## REVIEWS

### The Telegraph

*The best classical and opera CDs and DVDs of 2022 so far, from JS Bach to Kurt Weill*

Saturday 23 July 2022

CD Kurt Weill – Symphony no. 2, Violin Concerto: Tamás Kocsis and Ulster Orchestra

★★★★★

Some great composers' music seems to float free of their own time. You don't think about Counter-Reformation Rome when you listen to Palestrina, or the French Revolution when you listen to Beethoven's Eroica Symphony (you might think about freedom, but you don't picture sans-culottes rioting in the streets).

With Kurt Weill it's different. His music is so imbued with the spirit of 1920s Berlin it's hard to hear one of his famous songs like "Surabaya Jonny" without thinking of Isherwood's 'Goodbye to All That' or George Grosz's angry paintings of street walkers and war-wounded. That may be why his concert music is comparatively neglected, compared with his eternally popular music-theatre works like 'The Threepenny Opera' and 'Street Scene'. We think the "real" Kurt Weill couldn't possibly be revealed in something called Symphony or Concerto. This new recording of his Violin Concerto and Second Symphony shows how wrong that view is. Weill's familiar musical personality blazes out, as unmistakably as in any of those better-known works. You feel the same bitter sarcasm and anger, followed disconcertingly by tender sweetness. You hear big, defiant tunes that could easily have been sung by Weill's wife, the music-theatre star Lotte Lenya, backed by the strident sound of side-drum and squeaking woodwind and grunting double-bass like some distorted cabaret band.

Having said that, there are differences. In his music-theatre works Weill made a deliberate attempt to be musically straight-forward. In the concert-hall he could allow himself a little more complication. The Second Symphony, composed after he'd fled Berlin to escape Nazi persecution (Weill was Jewish, and the son of a rabbi), has the heft and sophistication of a

proper symphony. In the slow movement, the grieving, dignified trombone melody which appears centre-stage comes back later, but now as a bass line to a new melody – the kind of subterranean connection symphonists like to make, even one as populist as Weill. In this excellent performance from the Ulster Orchestra under Jac van Steen both sides of the piece, the populist and the high-art, shine out beautifully.

The Violin Concerto written ten years earlier in 1924 is a tougher proposition. Weill at this time was an aspiring modernist and his musical language is much more astringent. Another difficulty is that piece is an extraordinary amalgam of cultural references with Bach-like counterpoint, Mahler-like trumpets, proper “modern-music” angularity and high-kicking dances all rubbing shoulders. But one thing this excellent recording makes clear even on a first hearing is the prevailing mood of night-time mystery, tipping sometimes towards menace. The solo violinist Tamás Kocsis, who has a day job leading the Ulster Orchestra, flings off the extraordinary finger-twisting solo part with what sounds like ease, and the orchestral players match him for accuracy and finesse. In all it’s a marvel.

IH [Ivan Hewett]

*Kurt Weill – Symphony no. 2, Violin Concerto is released by SOMM*

**Lebrecht Weekly | Kurt Weill: 2nd Symphony, Violin Concerto (Somm)**



BY NORMAN LEBRECHT ON 22 JULY 2022

Banned in Berlin and exiled in March 1933, Kurt Weill stayed for a while in Paris where he wrote a symphonic work to a commission from the Singer sewing machine heiress, Princesse de Polignac. The symphony was taken up by his fellow-exile Bruno Walter and performed three times in the Netherlands, but apparently nowhere else. It was not published until 1966 and remains an esoteric item, seldom performed or recorded.

The present release by Jan van Steen and the Ulster Orchestra is by some distance the best I have heard, elegantly phrased and chock full of show tunes from the Brecht-Weill playbook. What’s not to like? The structure is totally secure and thematic development keeps the ear fully engaged for almost thirty minutes.

The Ulster Orchestra, on this form, are serious contenders for Euro 2022 – brilliant in brass passages and finely tuned in the strings. This symphony, Weill’s last pitch at a concert audience, really needs to get out more. Weill migrated to America and, unlike Erich Wolfgang Korngold, who kept hoping for rehabilitation in Carnegie Hall, he went straight to Broadway and never looked back.

Weill’s violin concerto, written in his early 20s as a student of Ferruccio Busoni, is imbued with his teacher’s ultra-seriousness and with a wind ensemble that echoes Stravinsky’s style at the time. If you heard it alongside Alban Berg’s concerto, written in 1935, you would wonder which is the more advanced. There’s some really kooky stuff going on between the triangle and the xylophone. Tamas Kocsis is the excellent violin soloist.

At a time when orchestras are more confused than ever about what to play, these two works need to be thrust forcefully to the top of the pile. Weill was a brilliant, calculating composer

whose music never outlasts its welcome or overheats – the best possible reason to hear it in August.  
NL

## EUROPADISC

The following **Europadisc** review, Friday 15 July 2022, was published online and seems to be uncredited. It's available at [https://www.europadisc.co.uk/classical/225826/Weill\\_-\\_Violin\\_Concerto,\\_Symphony\\_no.2.htm](https://www.europadisc.co.uk/classical/225826/Weill_-_Violin_Concerto,_Symphony_no.2.htm)

Just a couple of months after an acclaimed recording of Kurt Weill's Second Symphony by the Rotterdam Philharmonic under Lahav Shani on Warner Classics, along comes another, this time from the Ulster Orchestra and their principal guest conductor Jac van Steen from Somm Recordings. While Shani coupled the Symphony with Shostakovich's Fifth, Steen pairs it with Weill's own Violin Concerto, with the Ulster Orchestra's leader, Tamás Kocsis, as soloist – making a particularly attractive coupling of Weill's two best-known works for the concert hall.

Although Weill is best known for his music theatre collaborations with Bertolt Brecht, notably *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, his early career – during which he studied with Humperdinck and, most crucially, Busoni – included notable forays into concert repertoire. The Second Symphony (originally titled 'Symphonic Fantasy') was composed in 1933-34, placing it between the 'winter's tale' *Der Silbersee* and the choral ballet *The Seven Deadly Sins*. Following Hitler's rise to power in early 1933, Weill fled Nazi Germany for Paris, and the Symphony is the first work of his long exile as well as his last orchestral concert work. It was premiered in Amsterdam in 1934 by the Concertgebouw Orchestra under no less a figure than Bruno Walter, who described it as having a 'nocturnal, uncanny, mysterious atmosphere' and suggested to Weill the title 'Three Night Scenes' which Weill initially adopted.

In retrospect, one can also sense an unmistakable note of menace, heightened by the martial dotted figuration that peppers the first two movements, as well as a distinctive wind-only goose-step parody halfway through the third and final movement which, were it not for the larger than usual scoring, could have come straight out of one of Weill's stage works. Steen directs a sensitively shaped performance that finds unexpected beauty in what can come across as a hard-nosed, sardonic score. Although Shani and his Rotterdam players find an extra degree of bite, depth and urgency, particularly in the Symphony's ominous slow introduction, this new Somm account is the more sympathetic reading, with an admirably natural balance caught by producer David Byers and engineer Ben Connellan in Belfast's Ulster Hall. The all-important woodwind and brass contingent – notably the solo trumpet in the first movement and solo trombone in the central *Largo* – is outstanding, well supported by some warm string playing.

Ten years before the Second Symphony, Weill composed his only concertante work, the Concerto for violin, wind, percussion and double basses – a similar scoring to Stravinsky's contemporaneous Piano Concerto. Like the Stravinsky concerto, Weill's Violin Concerto was premiered in Paris (Stravinsky in 1924, Weill in 1925), with the Orchestre de Concerts Straram under Walther Straram, and the solo part taken by not the originally intended Joseph

Szigeti but Marcel Darrieux, who had recently premiered Prokofiev's First Violin Concerto. Weill's Concerto was composed at the culmination of his studies with his revered teacher Busoni, who died just three weeks after the work's completion. There's a palpable Busonian atmosphere, not least in the tarantella-like finale and a generally Italianate, occasionally harlequin-like demeanour, but also nods towards the expressionism of Hindemith – another important influence on the young composer's development.

Cast, like the Symphony, in three movements, with the central slow movement further divided into three parts (*Notturmo*, *Cadenza* and *Serenata*), the Concerto unmistakably inhabits the world of the 1920s, retreating from the overblown textures of neo-Romanticism while referencing popular music as well as Mahler's more capricious nocturnal moods. Tamás Kocsis proves to be an excellent soloist (his repertoire also includes the Berg Violin Concerto – Berg being the only member of the Second Viennese School who was sympathetic to Weill's particular form of neoclassical 'new objectivity'); he tosses off the technically demanding solo part – including the formidable central *Cadenza* – with aplomb and a keen sense of involvement, and is partnered splendidly by his colleagues, notably the wry xylophone solo in the *Notturmo*. There's lots of mercurial, quickfire figuration for both soloist and orchestra, and Steen expertly steers his players through the kaleidoscope of textures.

As the only currently available coupling of these two works in the catalogue, this disc makes an excellent recommendation for Weill enthusiasts, and even if there were other identical competitors it would comfortably hold its own. It should be particularly attractive for those who respond less readily to Weill's theatre works, showing another side to one of the most notable younger composers in early 20th-century music.

## ART MUSIC LOUNGE

**Kurt Weill's Violin Concerto & 2nd Symphony** by Lynn René Bayley © 2022

4 July 2022, published at <https://artmusiclounge.wordpress.com>

**WEILL: *Symphony No. 2. Violin Concerto*\* / \*Tamás Kocsis, *vln*; Ulster Orchestra; Jac van Steen, *cond* / Somm Recordings SOMMCD 280**

This one intrigued me simply because I had never heard any instrumental classical music written by Kurt Weill, best known for his avant-garde musical *Three Penny Opera* and his equally avant-garde opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*—not to mention dozens of hit songs which he wrote after coming to America and giving up classical composition. The Violin Concerto dates from 1924, the Second Symphony from a decade later.

Although there are clear signposts in this music that one can recognize as being Weill-like, its structure is on a larger scale, following standard composition practice of his time. Those signposts are specifically in his use of stepwise harmony and a stiff, but lively, rhythmic drive related to ragtime. Here, too, he also makes quite a bit out of alternating 4/4 and 3/4 time without trying to make it sound whimsical or amusing, as he did in the two more famous works mentioned above.

In addition to the briskness of his tempi and rhythms, one also hears the brusqueness that permeate *Three Penny* and *Mahagonny*. Interestingly, if I were to hear this symphony “cold,” without knowing who wrote it, I might place it as being by a relatively conservative but still modern American composer of the mid-to-late 1950s. Our composers were turning out similar pieces around that time. This is, however, more of a tribute to Weill for inventing this style than to those later Americans for copying it.

Some themes are juxtaposed, but in the development section he is quite strict about taking his basic material to interesting places. Even more interestingly, the first subject of the second movement, though marked “Largo,” is not only far jauntier than any symphonic “Largo” I’ve ever heard, but almost sounds like the music of African-American composer William Grant Still without directly copying his style. Yet this, too, eventually leads into typically Weill-like figures, a quirky lyrical melody played by the trombone against stop-time chords, followed by its extension played by the violins with stop-time chords played by the winds. Despite the somewhat stiff rhythms, what develops eventually almost sounds like a tango.

The “Allegro vivace” is also whimsical but, to my ears, not as original or as fascinating as the first two movements—at least, not until we pass the halfway mark, where things really liven up, and we get a sort of frantic tarantella.

There appear to be at least seven other recordings of the Symphony, one each by Gary Bertini, Mariss Janssons, Anthony Beaumont, Julius Rudel, Marin Alsop, Lahav Shani, Jürgen Bruns and Michel Swierczewski. I sampled the Rudel recording but, although his tempi seem to be quicker than van Steen’s, he doesn’t capture the same swagger in the music. Alsop captures the swagger better, but her tempi are so slow as to practically kill the momentum in the music. Swierczewski is really fast, but to my ears gets the whole feeling of the music wrong. I felt that Shani’s recording on Warner Classics, with the Rotterdam Philharmonic, was the only one as good as this one.

The Violin Concerto opens with slow, mysterious music played by clarinets and flutes with little punctuations by the low brass and snare drum. The violin kind of sneaks in about a minute into the first movement, playing an atonal melody that weaves around the winds until they fall away, but the French horns play a soft rhythmic figure against it for a while. Weill keeps this whimsical little game up for quite some time, shifting and changing the orchestral rhythms while the violin continues to saw away at its quirky melodic line. This piece sounds far less “American,” but is very much in line with a great deal of mid-to-late 1920s German modern music. Once again, van Steen conducts with excellent energy and a real feeling for the music. It doesn’t sound so much like a real violin concerto as it does an orchestral piece with solo violin obbligato.

This quiet, rather subdued atmosphere continues into the rhythmic second movement, where one hears an extended xylophone solo. Weill almost seems to be using a chamber orchestra, and quite a small one at that, with a very heavily reduced string section. This is really some wacky music! The third section is actually listed as IIb, “Cadenza,” but it, too, is highly unorthodox in both style and structure. The end of this movement is IIc, “Serenata,” another odd little melody, here set to a syncopated figure. Indeed, even the third movement, though in a faster tempo than the first two, uses just a handful of instruments and says within its odd, atonal little sound world.

I found this a fascinating disc and the performances first-rate. Unless you have better ones in your collection, I say, go for it!

**BBC Classical Music**, published: September 9, 2022

**Weill: Violin Concerto: Symphony No. 2**

Tamás Kocsis (violin); Ulster Orchestra/Jac van Steen (SOMM)

by Claire Jackson

Violin Concerto; Symphony No. 2, 'Symphonic Fantasy'

Tamás Kocsis (violin); Ulster Orchestra/Jac van Steen

*SOMM Recordings SOMMCD 280 57:25 mins*

Kurt Weill's Second Symphony uses a fast-slow-fast structure and a granular level of thematic development that was the *modus operandi* of Haydn, Mozart et al. The work was composed in 1933, commissioned by Princesse Edmond de Polignac, whom Weill, having fled Germany when Hitler came to power, had met in Paris. It's difficult not to interpret the dark and brooding motifs as emblematic of that turbulent period; the opening off-beat melodies are reincarnated in the *Allegro vivace* as a strident march. The Ulster Orchestra gets into every nook and cranny of this neglected piece (the brass are particularly outstanding).

Weill's earlier Violin Concerto (1924) is written for an 'Orchestra of Wind Instruments' also featuring percussion and double bass. It bears the hallmark of Weill's studies with Busoni, with some unusual colouring (the brusque xylophone in the 'Notturmo', for example) and exploratory use of harmony. At 24, Weill's iconic Berlin-cabaret sound is already identifiable: the dance-like flute solo in the 'Serenata'; and the rollicking finale. Soloist Tamás Kocsis, leader of the Ulster Orchestra, is superb throughout this pristine recording.

**GRAMOPHONE**, September 2022

WEILL Symphony No 2, Violin Concerto (Tomás Kocsis)

Ulster Orchestra / Jac Van Steen

SOMMCD280

Reviewed by Edward Seckerson

No one ever needs to convince me of Kurt Weill's importance in the great scheme of music. Not just in the world of musical theatre, where I have long been an advocate of his American work – not least because the assimilation was so extraordinary – but in the dramatically shifting landscape of European music between the wars. His Concerto for violin, wind instruments, percussion and bass is a startling case in point.

There is nothing – nothing – like this piece in the repertoire of that period (1924) and beyond. You may hear allusions to Stravinsky, not just in the choice of wind band but in the brittle, streey sound of *The Soldier's Tale*, but that's where influences begin and end. Yes, the aestheticism of Hindemith is self-evident but it isn't shot through with the same degree of well-upholstered grandness and the tone of the piece remains resolutely monochromatic, an amazing confluence of the high-minded and the base.

The threnody of clarinets that opens the piece is about as inauspicious as it gets in a 20th-century concerto but the sound world is so drily austere as to be intriguing. A trio of

woodwinds later allude to the ‘Dies irae’ so the mood is hardly upbeat. Then again, the concerto form part signifies a degree of confrontation and tension between soloist and orchestra, and in that regard you might see the piece as a challenging musical debate. In the central Notturmo the soloist (excellent Tamás Kocsis) is pitted against a xylophone, an instrument so glaringly inappropriate (even coarse) as to suggest a gatecrasher hell-bent on taking over the solo spot. In the Cadenza of this tripartite movement the obligatory solo trumpet (so beloved of Weill’s Berliner sound) edges its way into the soloist’s vehement discourse. This is grittily ‘modernistic’ music – not the easiest of listens – but the nature of the tunes is still eminently Weillian.

The Second Symphony, while unmistakably the work of the same composer, is more mainstream and characterised by a motoric urgency that might be seen as an all-pervasive metaphor for Weill’s flight from Nazi Germany. The solo trumpet is again evocative of the kind of street song that he will have left behind in his associations with Bertolt Brecht and there’s a breezy flute melody which might come straight from *The Threepenny Opera*. And what of the trombone oration in the central *Largo*? It might be a funeral march or it might be a sad procession of the dispossessed. Austerity and wistfulness rub shoulders with resilience and resolve.

This spirited account from the Ulster Orchestra under Jac van Steen comes hard on the heels of an outstanding recording from the dynamic new conductor of the Rotterdam Philharmonic, the Israeli Lahav Shani, and there’s no question that his account of the Second Symphony has a more defined musculature about it. But his coupling is a terrifically engaging account of Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony and I imagine that the appeal here will be of an uncompromising all-Weill pairing.

**DIAPASON**, November 2022 issue

### **De Haydn à Hollywood**

Herbert Blomstedt vous attend aussi avec les deux dernières symphonies de Schubert, l’« *Inachevée* » et la « *Grande* » (DG), toujours avec le Gewandhaus. Restons dans le domaine symphonique: Haydn par Giovanni Antonini, John Adams par Paavo Järvi (Alpha l’un et l’autre), la 5<sup>e</sup> et la 4<sup>e</sup> de Bruckner par Christian Thielemann pour l’une et Simon Rattle pour l’autre, la 2<sup>e</sup> de Alfvén par Lukasz Borowicz **et celle de Kurt Weill par Jac Van Steen (Somm)**, et même des pages hollywoodiennes dirigées par John Wilson (Chandos), il y en a pour tous les goûts!

Does anyone have a copy of the review?

**FANFARE**, magazine (USA) has a review in Issue 46:3 (Jan/Feb 2023)

Does anyone have a copy of this review?