STUDIA UBB MUSICA, LXIV, 1, 2019 (p. 29 – 38)
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbmusica.2019.1.02

MUSICAL EXPRESSION AS A TOOL OF DRAMA-BASED PEDAGOGY IN BRECHT/WEILL & EISLER'S LEARNING-PLAYS

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SUMMARY. The study examines the historical starting points of the realization of the parable, its pedagogical, dramaturgical, musical instruments and goals in the *He Who Says Yes* and *The Measure Taken* learning-plays. The results of my research are aimed at the fact that the two investigated works are – not for the public but for an opportunity to self-development – to render more accurate reflections on the learning-play and more credible picture of their complexity.

Keywords: Lehrstück, *He Who Says Yes*, *The Measures Taken*, Brecht / Weill & Eisler

From the late 1920s, the experimental genre of learning-plays (Brecht's own English translation for "Lehrstücke") was an important manifestation of Brecht's anti-Aristotelian epic theatrical concept – that is, a theatrical concept for the purposes of pedagogy, cognition, teaching, not pleasure. In the words of Brecht, "the pedagogical endeavours that use theatrical elements yet do not need a genuine theatre"[2] aim „to present human behaviour in certain situations, thus presenting them for public debate."[3] The writer considered the process of learning to be important rather than the end product, that is, the performance. According to him, "the name 'learning-play' indicates that the instructive piece *is instructive for the performer*. Therefore, it needs no audience."[4]

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[2] Bertolt Brecht: "Das deutsche Drama vor Hitler." in: *idem:Werke. Band 22*. Aufbau Verlag Berlin und Weimar und Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1993, p. 167.

[3] Endre Kiss: *A látványfunkciója Brecht tandráma-sorozatában.* INCO, vol. 13, May 2009, *www.inco.hu/inco13/filo/cikk19h.htm* (18.12.2018)

[4] Bertolt Brecht: "Anmerkungen zu den Lehrstücken." in: idem:*Die Lehrstücke*.Verlag Philipp Reclam, Leipzig, 1978, p. 167.

Brecht's wording is not always clear: in his remarks on learning-plays he states that his pieces not needing an audience are *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent* (1929), *The Exception and the Rule* (1930), *He Who Says Yes* and *He Who Says No* (1930), *The Measures Taken* (1930), *The Horatians and the Curiatians* (1934); yet at the same time, he himself indicated – and the literature on Brecht indicates– also works such as *The Flight across the Ocean* (1929), *The Mother* (1932) or the *Life of Galileo* (1939) as "Lehrstücke."

International scholarly literature attributes a somewhat subordinated and underestimated role to music in Brecht's work, owing to the fact that the author himself, in his later theoretical writings, described his efforts of "de-musicalizing" the genre of drama.[5] However, his collaborators – Paul Hindemith, Kurt Weill, and Hanns Eisler – were involved from the very beginning in the creation of Brecht's learning-plays–with the exception of *The Horatians and the Curiatians,* which was originally written as a music-free play –, and the plays were usually staged, and have been staged ever since, with the music composed to accompany them. So music is not a mere option to perform the plays, and Brecht's texts are better seen as librettos –this way it is easy to understand the enthusiasm of Joy H. Calico, who says that these learning-plays "are to be sung, performed and danced to."[6] Brecht's wording is sometimes inconsistent with regard to the use of the name of a genre too: he often calls the school opera learning-play, other time she calls *He Who Says No* a school opera, although his co-authors did not compose music to go with this play. Thus, regardless of the author's concepts, Brecht's epic theatre becomes an epic musical theatre, and his theatre pedagogy turns into, in part, concert pedagogy instructing both the performer and the public.

School opera: *He Who Says Yes*

While, among the learning-plays, the radio play *The Flight across the Ocean* attempted to educate the masses via the new mass media, and *He Who Says Yes* addressed school and school drama, *The Measures Taken* contains a new subject matter of learning-plays: it proclaims the instruction of the working masses to have a "right" revolutionary behaviour.

He Who Says Yes, intended as a school opera performed by students, is based on the story of a fifteenth-century Japanese *nô drama*– originally

[5] Joy H. Calico: "Lehrstück, Opera, and the New Audience Contract of the Epic Theater." in: idem: *Brecht at the Opera*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2008, pp. 16–42. esp. 18.
[6] *Op. cit.,* p. 22.

reflecting Buddhist philosophy– that had been translated by Elisabeth Hauptmann and shared with Bertolt Brecht to be processed into a libretto.[7] The composer summed up the plot of *He Who Says Yes* as follows:

> The main character is a boy who is about to set out with his teacher to take medicine from the town for his sick mother. The road is dangerous, so the mother does not want to let the boy leave. The teacher also tries to dissuade him from leaving home. The boy, however, decides to help his sick mother. On the way, when they reach the most dangerous place, the boy suddenly feels exhausted and puts the whole company of people in a risk. The boy is offered the following choice: they should either turn back or follow the old habit of throwing the sick down into the valley. The boy chooses the latter. "He said yes," the choir sings. In some cases, Brecht gave different motives in the text as it was in the Japanese original. [...] The medicine that the boy wants to take to save his sick mother as motivation was also Brecht's idea. [...] Above all, we introduced this motif for the reason, that students should learn something from the learning-play. That is why we included the sentence of consent. "The first of sciences to be learnt is that of consent." This is what students have to learn. They need to know that a community they join will require the individual to draw certain conclusions. The boy goes through the way of the community when he agrees to be thrown into the valley.[8]

[7]At the beginning of the score we read: "Following the Japanese *Taniko* play, rephrased by Arthur Waley." Kurt Weill: *Der Jasager.* (Universal Edition, No. 8225), p. 1. In 1921, British orientalist, sinologist, japanologist and literary translator Arthur Waley (1889–1966) published his own adaptation of fifteen ancient Japanese nô dramas under the title *The Nô Plays of Japan.* The Japanese Kanji character denoting the word nô means "being able," "capable," and "gifted;"thus, the nô drama is primarily a demonstration, a presentation of one's talents and skills. It is characterized– unlike the kabuki –by is simplicity, short dialogues; and a rhymed or prose introduction resembling a report, usually performed by a choir. The contemporary form of the play, which can be traced back to the Middle Ages, and is still played today in Japan, is largely due to nô performers Kan'ami Kiyotsugu (1333–1384) and Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443). Zeami's theory summarizing the technical principles and aesthetic requirements of the performances provided guidance to performers for centuries. Bertolt Brecht's work reminded Elisabeth Hauptmann of Zeami's teachings who worked, comprehensively and steadily, for the renewal of Japanese theatre in fourteenth–fifteenth-century Japan, while she was translating Arthur Waley's book into German. The Program Guide of the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin, as of April 14, 1966, for the performance of *He Who Says Yes.* Hauptmann did not intend to publish her translations but eventually Tanikogot published under the title *Tanikooder Wurf ins Tal.* in: Der Scheinwerfer, Städtische Bühnen Essen, Spielzeit 1929/30, H. 6/7

[8] "Aktuelles Zwiegespräch über die Schuloper zwischen Kurt Weill und Dr. Hans Fischer." in: *Die Musikpflege*1930/31, H. 1, Verlag von Quelle & Meyer Leipzig, pp. 48–53, esp. 51–52.

Musical expression as a tool of drama-based pedagogy in *He Who Says Yes*

Not only does the musical structure of *He Who Says Yes* prepare the boy to say yes, but it also indicates objectivity and distancing. The "angular" starting motif of the opening theme – returning in the repetitions at the end of each act – plays an important role here. It is already clear from the first tones of the work that the music is different here from Weill's themes that had been customary and had proven to be successful in *The Three penny Opera* and *Mahagonny*. In the blink of an eye, this motif sobers up and disillusions the listener from the emotional depths at the end of each act; and the choral narrative in the middle of the movement makes the cathartic moments even more distant. The opening theme and its repetitions – in their emotional character – depart from the rest of the movements, thus fulfilling the alienating function of the epic musical theatre. With Brecht's words, the "gestural nature"[9] of music also serves as an alienating effect in the school opera. Instead of a one-by-one musical depiction of each character, Weill utilizes gestural elements of music that represent "total attitudes,"[10] so the individual actors do not have unique themes; the characters cannot be identified by their melodies. The *ostinato*-like music of movement No. 2 for saxophone, clarinet, piano – reminiscent to a song accompaniment – is a good example: it is unconnected to the singing Teacher and the textual content. This gestural character of music removes actors and spectators alike from the performed roles.

When presenting the road to the boy's decision, Weill – as a result of his pursuit for "simple and popular" music[11] –uses the development of the simplest elements of music as a tool for dramatic enhancement. The eighth notes for the string *staccato* in movement No.3 envision the crossing of the mountains; then the rhythmic elements of the accompaniment continue to evolve during the Teacher's announcement about the journey; and the same rhythmic material will be the *arioso* piano accompaniment for the Mother's farewell.

The simple expansion of the performers' apparatus is also a dramatic boost in *He Who Says Yes*. When describing the law of the mountain and the process of consenting to be thrown into the valley, the number of singers and instrumentalists increases significantly. The law is first introduced by the song ensemble of the Three Students (No.8), for which Weill required a

[9] Bertolt Brecht: "A gesztikus zenéről" (About the Gesture Music) in: idem: *Színházi tanulmányok (Theatrical Papers)*. Magvető, Budapest, 1969, pp. 234–237.
[10] *Op. cit.,* p. 234.
[11] „Aktuelles Zwiegespräch über die Schuloper zwischen Kurt Weill und Dr. Hans Fischer." in: *Die Musikpflege*1930/31, H. 1, Verlag von Quelle & Meyer Leipzig, pp. 48–53, esp. 50.

minimal orchestral support. Demonstrating the democratic nature of the decision, the choir also intervenes in order to enable the Boy to decide his own destiny, but their final decision – not to turn back because of him – is pronounced by the full orchestra and the choir.

In the short dialogue about the "ancient custom" between the Teacher and the Boy (No.10), repetition is the main means of raising stress. A short piano theme is played 14 times – with some expansion and tone variation – with the Teacher's words.

As early as in the first act, Weill already hints at a possible tragic outcome of the journey for the Boy. Although movement No.5 ends with the imitational co-play of three vocals and stringed soloists, reminiscent of chamber music, and expressing confidence, the weighty beats of the following movement – at the end of the act – are already ominous and suggest that the Boy will not return from the fatal journey.

After the boy has consented, and the long silence preceding his decision, Weill appoints the plucked instruments and the saxophone to bear the leading roles of the accompaniment, thus gaining a special tone from the simple school band for the pronounced and accepted judgment.

At the top of political art

With *The Measures Taken,* Eisler and Brecht reach the culmination of their political art illustrating the ways to obtain power. The starting point for the plot is the Japanese *Taniko* tale already treated for *He Who Says Yes.* Brecht attempts to break away from the "feudal" overtones of the story by means of its political secularisation.[12] The learning-play formulates a criticism of the wrong revolutionary behaviour by the proletarians of the world, showing "four communist agitators, represented by the mass choir, standing before the party's tribunal. The agitators of the Chinese soviet republics engaged in communist propaganda in South China (dressed as Southern Chinese) and in the meantime, they had to shoot their youngest comrade. To prove the necessity of executing their comrade, they present before the tribunal how the young comrade behaved in different political situations. They show that he was a revolutionary in his emotions, yet he did not show proper discipline and was not using common sense, so he was unintentionally a serious threat to the movement. In the end, he had to volunteer to die otherwise the others' illegal work would have all been for nothing. The piece shows that there are harmful actions during the revolutionary activity,

[12] Brecht was mainly criticized by Eisler, who appreciated Weill's music, but he regarded the story as a "moronic feudal piece" ("schwachsinniges feudalistisches Stück"). Jürgen Elsner (ed.): *Wir reden hier nicht von Napoleon. Wir reden von Ihnen! Gespräche mit Hanns Eisler und Gerhart Eisler.* Verlag Neue Musik, Berlin, 1971, p. 191.

and as a consequence, their perpetrators might only be able to help the proletariat by disappearing forever."[13]

In his learning-play aimed at persuasion, Brecht can cover even the intolerably dogmatic parts as the report before the party's plenary session ("Der Kontrollchor") about the killing of the Young Comrade. In his notes, Brecht referred to the pedagogical parable found in *The Measures Taken:* "We should not only reflect socially positive actions and behaviours, by no means; the representation (possibly great representation) of asocial acts and behaviours can also convey educational effects."[14] By showing the bourgeois revolutionary character of the Young Comrade as improper political behaviour, the learning-play, following Lenin's guidance, warns of leftist radicalism.[15] In the case of "proper" political behaviour, the death of the Young Comrade could have been avoided, as well as the situation in which he put his comrades and himself into harm's way.

Musical expression as a tool of drama-based pedagogy in *The Measures Taken*

The music of *The Measures Taken* always serves the text, the purpose of political persuasion. Eisler's music is a stage accessory of the learning-play, a kind of acoustic requisite, so it can be considered as theatrical accompaniment, in part due to the preponderance of prose text. The composer uses simple and convincing tools; such is the brass and percussion instrumentation, which spreads convincingly the "teaching of the classics, the ABC of communism,"[16] using the simplest rhythmic elements to demonstrate the "march of the revolution"[17] (No. 14).

A similar revolutionary march – almost like the Red Square parade of Soviet soldiers – is shown when the rice-hauling coolies start talking (no. 5); and the trumpet–horn–trombone–percussion instrumentation of the Control Chorus has a similarly militant effect: "Come out into the streets! Fight! The time for waiting is past!"[18] (No. 7a)

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[13] Bertolt Brecht: "Das Lehrstück »Die Maßnahme«." in: *idem: Die Lehrstücke.* Verlag Philipp Reclam, Leipzig, 1978, p. 170.

[14] Bertolt Brecht: "Theorie der Pädagogien." in: idem: *Die Lehrstücke.*Verlag Philipp Reclam, Leipzig, 1978, pp. 168–169, esp. 169.

[15] Being "only" a leftist is, in Lenin's view, a revolutionary, democratic behaviour that is "the paediatric disease of communism," and a harmful ideology in the world movement towards the liberation of the proletariat. Vladimir Lenin: *"Left-Wing" Communism: an Infantile Disorder*. Progress Publishers, USSR, 1964.

[16] Bertolt Brecht: *The Measures Taken and Other Lehrstücke*. Arcade Publishing, New York, 1977, p. 34.

[17] *Loc. cit.*

[18] *Op. cit.,* p. 19.

The musical motifs in the song of the coolies (Nr.5) also reveal the awakening to class-consciousness. Such is the music initiating the movement, which symbolizes the whiplashes of the Overseer driving the coolies. In the same place, the tempo change in the coolies' song encouraging faster pace and the *secco* instrumental play of the orchestra also express the acceleration of hauling the rice. This change of pace is also visually manifested in Brecht's text.

In addition to loud agitation, alienation is also a means of persuasion in *The Measures Taken*. Criticizing his own behaviour, the Merchant sings proudly in the refrain of his song (Nr.8b) that he does not knows the value of rice or cotton, he only knows their prices. Brecht's rhyme of with words *Reis-Preis* gives a particularly sharp meaning to this refrain, whose elusive effect is further enhanced by the subsequent virtuoso brass intermezzo. At the end of the song, the last sentence of the Merchant – in a slight departure from Brecht's original text – is also sung by the chorus. Eisler entitled the Control Chorus' text starting with "Come out, comrades! Risk the penny…" (Nr.7) – a title not mentioned by Brecht.

The essence of the teaching of *The Measures Taken* is formulated in the song of the Control Chorus in the movement *Ändere die Welt, siebrauchtes* (no.9):

> With whom would the just man not sit
> To help justice?
> What medicine is too bitter
> For the man who's dying?
> What vileness should you not suffer to
> Annihilate vileness?[19]

Brecht's text about "vileness" and its "medicine" is accompanied by Eisler's most lyrical music in the course of the whole learning-play. Showing what is ugly as beautiful, the music also indicates what the authors deem to be the "proper" revolutionary behaviour.

At the turn of the 1920s and 30s, the learning-plays played the role of a sociological experiment.[20] Although Brecht was hoping that the learning-play opens new opportunities for modern music, he was also well aware of the difficulties the composers were to face when seeking to meet the requirements of the epic theatre: "The 'progressive' music today is still

[19] *Op. cit.,* p. 25.

[20] Bertolt Brecht: "Der Dreigroschenprozeß: Ein soziologisches Experiment." in: idem: *Werke. Band 21*. Aufbau Verlag Berlin und Weimar und Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1992, pp. 448–514, esp. 509.

being written for the concert hall. A mere glimpse to the concert audience is sufficient to find out it is impossible to use the music that produces such effects for political and philosophical purposes" – he wrote in his study on *The use of music in the epic theatre*.[21] However hard Brecht's insightful composers tried to compose simple music, it was, in the end of the day, the strong emotions arising from the essence of music that brought about the end of the period of learning-plays: "The genre experiment of the learning-play is believed to have failed as a result of the contradiction of the highly rational content of the text and the emotional character of its music," says György Mihály Vajda in his Epilogue to the first Hungarian edition of Brecht's works.[22] Although the writer quit writing learning-plays, the achievements of the "Lehrstück" era survived in the Brecht's later great "epic" plays.

The authors ranked the two learning-plays among their most significant works. Brecht, four days before his death, in answer to the question of which play he thought represented the theatrical form of the future, he named, without hesitation, *The Measures Taken*.[23] Kurt Weill, in 1935, shortly upon his arrival in America, in an interview about *He Who Says Yes,* talked about the play as his most important work that far.[24] In *He Who Says Yes,* which better supports the didactic atmosphere between performers and viewers, "the learning-play receives a political – yet of course, not a party-affiliated political content – content through the tendency of consensus" – as Weill stated seven months before the début of *The Measures Taken*.[25] This is not the case with the latter play – the learning-play of Brecht/Eisler –, however, where a "measure" is "taken" against the Young Comrade for reasons dictated by party politics. Pedagogy, by synchronizing art with party politics, becomes an ancillary of political ideals and the purposes of agitation by the communist party. However, Eisler trusted that his efforts– equating music with social development –would remove the new music from its isolated position.[26]

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[21] Bertolt Brecht: "A zene felhasználása az epikus színházban." in: *idem: Színházitanulmányok*. Magvető, Budapest, 1969, pp. 223–233, esp. 231.

[22] György Mihály Vajda, György Walkó (eds.): *Bertolt Brecht színművei. Vol. II*. Magyar Helikon, 1964, pp. 1060–1061.

[23] Manfred Wekwerth: "Die letzten Gespräche" in: Bertolt Brecht: *Die Maßnahme.Kritische Ausgabe mit einer Spielanleitung von Reiner Steinweg*. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1972, p. 265.

[24] "Kurt Weill has secured a niche of his own at 35." in: *New York World Telegram*. 21.12.1935.

[25]"Aktuelles Zwiegespräch über die Schuloper zwischen Kurt Weill und Dr. Hans Fischer." in: *Die Musikpflege*1930/31, H. 1, Verlag von Quelle & Meyer Leipzig, pp. 48–53, esp. 52.

[26] Albrecht Betz: *Hanns Eisler. Musik einer Zeit, die sich eben bildet*. editiontext + kritik, München, 1976, p. 68.

Although scholarly literature has pointed out that the "Lehrstück" genre's kinship with the "apologetic drama" of Reformation era and with catechetic teachings,[27] the writer's life was accompanied by anti-religionism. According to Lutz Weltmann, a critic of Brecht, "Communism for Brecht was like Catholicism for Romanticists."[28] It is ironic that the development of learning-plays was induced by the propagation of the ideas of communism following the Catholic models of teaching.[29] Brecht's reputation has remained unbroken over the past five decades, irrespective of power structures: his significance in world literature is not diminished by his political orientation. Such an assessment– from the perspective of posterity – can be exemplary for artists representing different worldviews, and at the same time producing genuine artistic value. A similar revaluation process is taking place today – but is yet unfinished – in the judgment about Weill's and Eisler's oeuvre too.

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[27] Stephen Hinton: "Lehrstück: an aesthetics of performance." in: Bryan Gilliam (ed.): *Music and performance during the Weimar Republic.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 59–73.

[28] Lutz Weltmann: "Anmerkung zu Brechts »Versuchen«." in: *Literatur: Monatschrift für Literaturfreunde*. 33.10. 1930–09. 1931, p. 245.

[29] Julius Bab: "Lehrstück in Gegenwart und Vergangenheit." in: *Literarische Welt*, 19.02.1932., p. 403.

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