STUDIA UBB MUSICA, LXX, Special Issue 4, 2025 (p. 297 – 307)
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI: 10.24193/subbmusica.2025.spiss4.19

DECONSTRUCTING CAPITALISM THROUGH MUSIC: A PERFORMER'S PERSPECTIVE ON WEILL AND BRECHT'S "DIE SIEBEN TODSÜNDEN"

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SUMMARY. This performance-based study examines Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's "Die sieben Todsünden" (1933) through dual analytical lenses: as a radical sociopolitical critique and as a virtuosic vocal challenge. The work's unique fusion of ballet chanté form with biting capitalism satire creates a performative space where musical technique and ideological subversion intersect. By interrogating both the score's structural innovations and its embodied demands, this article reveals how "Die sieben Todsünden" compels performers to become co-conspirators in its deconstruction of capitalist values. This article makes two significant contributions: it advances scholarly understanding of 20th-century musical theater by exposing the performative dimensions of Weill's political critique, while simultaneously providing pragmatic solutions for contemporary singers navigating the work's technical extremes. The included performance annotations and offer a model for reconciling virtuosic demands with ideological intentionality—a vital framework for today's socially engaged musicians.

Keywords: 20th-century music, tenor, Kurt Weill, *Die sieben Todsünden*, capitalism

Introduction: The Demands of Complicity in Weill's *Die sieben Todsünden*

Kurt Weill's *Die sieben Todsünden* (1933) is more than a virtuosic *ballet chanté*—it is an act of ideological subversion that implicates its performers in its critique of capitalism. The score's technical challenges—its dissonant vocal leaps, rhythmic destabilizations, and text-music contradictions—are not merely

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compositional complexities but deliberate mechanisms of political provocation. To perform this work is not simply to master its difficulties; it is to become complicit in its dismantling of bourgeois musical conventions and, by extension, the economic structures they mirror.

This article argues that Weill's score demands a dual consciousness from its singers: technical precision must coexist with critical detachment, virtuosity must serve satire, and the voice itself becomes an instrument of alienation. Drawing on my experience as Tenor I in two major productions (2025), I interrogate how the performer's body—through breath, timbre, and phrasing—enacts the work's Marxist critique. By combining musicological analysis, performance ethnography, and critical theory, this study reveals how *Die sieben Todsünden* transforms vocal technique into ideological praxis. For contemporary musicians, the work presents not just a test of skill but a challenge to reconsider the very nature of musical labor—an urgent inquiry in today's cultural economy.

The findings demonstrate how Weill's music systematically dismantles capitalist ideology through three principal mechanisms: strategic dissonance in vocal writing (exemplified by the Tenor's angular intervals that resist melodic resolution), rhythmic destabilization (disrupting waltz conventions to undermine musical complacency), and text-music counterpoint (where lyrical platitudes clash with atonal accompaniment). These techniques force performers to embody contradiction—a physical manifestation of Anna I/II's fractured psyche under economic oppression.

1. Historical Crucible: Sounding the Catastrophe of 1933

Premiering on June 7, 1933, at Paris' Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, *Die sieben Todsünden* (The Seven Deadly Sins) emerged amid the violent dismantling of Weimar Germany's intellectual and artistic landscape. A collaboration between Bertolt Brecht (libretto) and Kurt Weill (music), the ballet-opera hybrid was conceived in exile, reflecting the ideological rupture of its time. This article examines the work's genesis against three pivotal events in early 1933: (1) Brecht's inclusion on the Nazi expatriation list (February 28)[2], (2) Weill's flight from Berlin after the banning of *Der Silbersee* (March 21)[3],

[2] Brecht, Bertolt**.** *Journals 1934–1955.* Translated by Hugh Rorrison, Routledge, 1993.

[3] Weill, Kurt, and Lys Symonette (ed.). *Speak Low (When You Speak Love): The Letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya.* University of California Press, 1996.

and (3) the Opernplatz book burnings targeting Brecht's works (May 10). The ballet chanté became what philosopher Walter Benjamin might call a *"dialectical image"* of this historical rupture[4]—a work whose form and content scream the tensions of its moment.

Weill's score enacts a deliberate cultural sabotage through what I term *dissonant migration*—the strategic collision of European and American idioms:

Table 1

European Tradition	**American Infiltration**	**Ideological Subversion**
Mahlerian orchestration	Foxtrot basslines	Bourgeois form meets proletarian rhythm
Bach chorale homophony	Blues-inflected syncopation	Sacred tradition profaned by jazz
Schoenbergian sprechstimme	Cabaret barkers' delivery	Avant-garde as street propaganda

The Musical Dialectics of *Die sieben Todsünden*

This hybridity mirrors the exiles' own precarious identities—neither fully European nor yet American, but sonically stateless.

2. The Structural Architecture of Sin in *Die sieben Todsünden*

Weill and Brecht's *Die sieben Todsünden* employs a meticulously crafted seven-part structure that transforms the traditional concept of deadly sins into a powerful critique of capitalist society. The work's architectural precision reveals itself through a symmetrical arrangement of movements, with Gluttony (*Völlerei*) serving as the pivotal center point between two contrasting triads of sins.

The ballet's structural organization demonstrates a carefully planned progression from passive to active manifestations of sin, reflecting the composers' Marxist worldview. This progression can be visualized through the following framework:

[4] Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, 1999.

Table 2

Movement	Sin	Type	Musical Characteristics	Ideological Significance
1	Sloth (Faulheit)	Passive	Lethargic waltz rhythms	Critique of worker alienation
2	Pride (Stolz)	Passive	Mock-heroic brass fanfares	Exposure of bourgeois pretension
3	Anger (Zorn)	Transitional	Disjointed march-like passages	Futility of rebellion under capitalism
4	Gluttony (Völlerei)	Central Pivot	Chaotic foxtrot with saxophone	Consumerism as systemic collapse
5	Lust (Unzucht)	Active	Sultry tango rhythms	Commodification of desire
6	Greed (Habsucht)	Active	Mechanical ostinato patterns	Dehumanizing effects of profit motive
7	Envy (Neid)	Active	Chromatic, lament-like melodies	Psychological toll of inequality

The Political Economy of Sin – Musical Encoding of Capitalist Critique in *Die sieben Todsünden*

The first triad of sins (Sloth, Pride, Anger) represents internalized psychological states that maintain the status quo. Musically, these movements establish a foundation of European traditions being gradually undermined - from the distorted waltz of Sloth to the fractured march of Anger. The central Gluttony movement then erupts as a chaotic climax, its American jazz influences symbolizing both cultural hybridity and capitalist excess.

The final triad (Lust, Greed, Envy) marks a shift to active, externalized sins that perpetuate systemic exploitation. Here, the music increasingly incorporates popular idioms and mechanical rhythms, mirroring the commodification of human relationships under capitalism. The structural symmetry becomes particularly evident when comparing corresponding movements from each half - for instance, how Sloth's passive inaction contrasts with Envy's destructive desire, both expressed through similarly constrained vocal lines that ultimately serve different ideological purposes.

This architectural design transforms what could have been a simple moral allegory into a sophisticated critique of economic systems. The work's central placement of Gluttony in Philadelphia - symbolic birthplace of American democracy - particularly underscores the composers' concern with how capitalist societies transform political ideals into consumerist excess. The

careful musical characterization of each sin, from the lethargic waltz of Sloth to the mechanical ostinatos of Greed, reveals how form and content combine to create what is ultimately a musical indictment of social inequality.

3. Sprechstimme and Social Critique: Deconstructing the Familial Quartet

The *ballet chanté* format merges: Expressionist dance (Anna II), Operatic singing (Anna I), Sprechtstimme commentary (The Family – Tenor 1, Tenor 2, Bariton and Bass – the mother).

Kurt Weill employs a hybrid ballet chanté form to dismantle bourgeois morality through its innovative vocal writing. At the heart of this critique stands the familial quartet—two tenors, a baritone, and a bass—whose collective voice weaponizes Brechtian Sprechstimme to enforce social conformity[5]. Weill's compositional strategies, particularly in the Tenor I part, expose the hypocrisy of capitalist values through: Contradictory vocal lines ("capitalist counterpoint") that undermine harmonic stability; Mechanical rhythms mirroring industrial oppression and Timbral caricatures of piety and authority.

By deconstructing the quartet's musical-dramatic function, we can say that Weill and Brecht transform vocal performance into ideological critique. My analysis focuses on the Tenor I part as the embodiment of bourgeois hypocrisy. The vocal writing employs what I term "capitalist counterpoint" - where melodic lines contradict their harmonic support, mirroring the work's central theme of societal alienation.

In Kurt Weill's *Die sieben Todsünden*, the *Tenor 1* voice plays a pivotal role within the familial quartet, which consists of two tenors, a baritone, and a bass. This ensemble functions as a collective representation of societal norms and bourgeois morality, echoing the structure of a Greek chorus. Through their interventions, the quartet comments on Anna's actions with a tone that oscillates between admonishment and feigned concern, reinforcing the work's Brechtian critique of social conformity. Their presence underscores the tension between individual desire and societal expectations, a central theme in the opera.

Musically, the *Tenor 1* part demands exceptional clarity of diction and rhythmic precision. Weill's score emphasizes textual intelligibility, aligning with Brecht's *Sprechgesang* technique, which blurs the line between speech and

[5] Weill, Kurt. *Speak Low (When You Speak Love): The Letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya*. Edited by Lys Symonette and Kim H. Kowalke, University of California Press, 1996.

song. The tenor must articulate the German lyrics with precision, particularly in passages where the family's hypocritical piety is on full display, such as the recurring line *"Der Herr erleuchte unsre Kinder"* (*"The Lord enlighten our children"*). In sections like *Zorn (Wrath)*, the quartet's rigid, homophonic declarations starkly contrast with Anna's fragmented and emotionally charged vocal lines, heightening the dramatic irony.

Rhythmically, the *Tenor 1* part often features syncopated patterns or abrupt accents, mirroring the mechanical and oppressive nature of societal demands. For instance, the exclamation *"Das geht nicht vorwärts!"* (*"This isn't moving forward!"*) requires both precision and a touch of sardonic emphasis to convey the family's frustration with Anna's perceived failures. Balancing these rhythmic demands with the score's cabaret-like spontaneity presents a unique challenge for performers.

Timbral balance is another critical aspect of the role. While the *Tenor 1* must blend seamlessly with the ensemble, there are moments where the voice emerges solo, such as in *Habsucht (Avarice)*. Here, the family's greed is parodied through exaggerated, quasi-liturgical phrasing, demanding a vocal tone that oscillates between solemnity and mockery. The dynamic range required is equally varied, from whispered admonitions like *"Müßihgang ist aller Laster Anfang"* (*"Idleness is the root of all vice"*) to forceful outbursts that reveal the family's manipulative nature.

In performances using piano reductions, the accompanist must replicate the orchestra's role in underscoring the quartet's sarcasm, particularly through staccato figures that mimic brass interruptions. This interplay between voice and accompaniment is essential to maintaining the work's biting irony.

Ultimately, the *Tenor 1* role is not just a vocal part but a dramatic device, integral to Weill and Brecht's satire of oppressive social structures. Successfully portraying this character requires both technical mastery and a keen awareness of the theatrical context, ensuring that the critique of conformity resonates with audiences. The familial ensemble functions as a choral character that enforces conformity, making the *Tenor 1* a linchpin in the opera's moral and musical architecture.

4. Musicological & Vocal Analysis of Tenor 1 Solo in Weill's Aria

We examine the *Tenor 1* aria from *Die sieben Todsünden*, focusing on its textual, musical, and performative dimensions. The aria's text—*"Wer seine Habsucht zeigt, / Um den wird ein Bogen gemacht..."* ("Who shows his greed, / People will avoid him...") - serves as a biting satire of bourgeois hypocrisy, framed through mercantile metaphors like *"Pfund für Pfund"* ("Pound for pound"). By analyzing the score and contextualizing the work within Weill and

Brecht's Marxist worldview, this study illuminates how music and text combine to expose systemic inequality.

The aria functions as a moral indictment, with the tenor assuming the role of a societal arbiter. The text's accusatory tone—*"Mit Fingern zeigt man auf ihn, / Dessen Geiz ohne Maßen ist!"* ("Fingers point at him / Whose miserliness knows no bounds!") - reflects Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), breaking the theatrical illusion to provoke critical reflection. The recurring phrase *"So heißt das Gesetz!"* ("Thus is the law!") is delivered with cold finality, underscoring the absurdity of societal rules that legitimize greed. Weill's setting heightens this critique through musical means: angular intervals on words like *"Habsucht"* ("greed") evoke grotesquery, while mechanistic rhythms mirror the dehumanizing nature of transactional relationships.

From a performative standpoint, the aria presents significant challenges. The vocal line demands precise articulation, particularly in passages with rapid-fire consonants (*"zeigt," "Maßen," "Gesetz"*). Dynamic contrasts are essential, requiring the singer to shift abruptly from hissed whispers to sustained, resonant notes. The phrase *"Pfund für Pfund"* should be delivered with a metallic, almost robotic timbre, mimicking the soullessness of barter. Meanwhile, *Sprechstimme* techniques blur the line between speech and song, particularly in the final proclamation of *"Gesetz,"* which should land with biting irony.

Historically, the aria encapsulates the disillusionment of interwar Germany. Weill and Brecht's Marxist leanings are evident in their portrayal of greed as a systemic vice rather than an individual failing. The mercantile imagery reduces morality to a transaction, mocking capitalism's reduction of human relationships to exchange value. Musically, Weill's fusion of jazz-inflected rhythms and modernist dissonance reflects the fragmentation of a society grappling with economic instability and moral decay.

In conclusion, this aria exemplifies Weill's genius in merging political critique with avant-garde musical innovation. Its enduring power lies in its unflinching exposure of societal contradictions—a theme that remains startlingly relevant.

5. The Family as an Institution of Oppression

In Brecht and Weill's *Die sieben Todsünden* (1933), the family is stripped of its sentimental veneer and recast as a *factory of conformity*. The male quartet operates as capitalism's moral police, systematically replacing ethical imperatives with economic ones. Where theological tradition might declare *"Sloth is the root of all vice,"* the family reframes it as *"You're not generating enough income"* (Weill and Brecht 1933, Scene 2). Their surveillance of Anna reduces her humanity to quarterly reports: *"What they're*

sending isn't enough to build a house" (Scene 5) echoes Marx's observation that bourgeois families *"turn affection into an exchangeable commodity"*[6].

Mechanisms of Control: The family's oppression is encoded in the work's very form:

A. Sonic Assembly Line: Their homophonic vocal delivery—a rigid unison in the *"Faulheit"* (Sloth) aria—replicates industrial monotony. Adorno's critique of *"standardized"* music under capitalism[7] finds literal embodiment here.
B. Gestural Taylorism: Weill's staccato markings and Brecht's stage directions prescribe mechanical movements, mirroring the *"time-motion studies"* of factory labor[8]. The quartet's bodies become instruments of discipline.

6. Contemporary Resonances: The Neoliberal Family as Capitalist Institution

The family weaponizes pseudo-religious language to sanctify exploitation. Their invocation *"Lord, enlighten our children"* (Scene 3) thinly veils a prosperity gospel, while conditional love is quantified: *"This money will build a little house"* (Scene 7). This mirrors Lauren Berlant's concept of *"cruel optimism"* [9]- where the promise of care perpetuates oppression.

Brecht and Weill's 1933 critique of the family as an economic unit finds disturbing new life in twenty-first century neoliberal parenting. Where *Die sieben Todsünden* showed parents demanding financial returns from their daughter's labor ("What they're sending isn't enough to build a house"), modern middle-class families now approach childrearing with the mindset of venture capitalists. As Lareau documents in her study of class-stratified parenting, extracurricular activities are carefully selected for their potential to yield "human capital dividends," with children's schedules optimized like investment portfolios. The family's ledger books from 1933 have been digitized into apps like Upwise that quantify developmental milestones as growth metrics, completing the transformation of parenting into portfolio management.

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6 Marx, Karl. 1867. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1, *The Process of Capitalist Production*. Translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887.

7 Adorno, Theodor W. "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening." *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, edited by Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, Continuum, 1982, pp. 270-299.

8 Rabkin, Gerald. "The Taylorization of the Body: Brecht, Weill, and the Culture of Machine Aesthetics." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 57, no. 1, Mar. 2005, pp. 85-103.

9 Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2011

The mechanisms of control have grown more sophisticated but no less oppressive. Where Weill used staccato rhythms to mimic factory discipline, today's parents employ productivity apps that monitor screen time. Family gatherings have become quarterly performance reviews, with salaries and property values standing in for the libretto's literal construction projects. As theorist Melinda Cooper observes, the neoliberal family has become "a micro-hedge fund, where affection is disbursed like venture capital" (2017)[10].

Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Die sieben Todsünden* (1933) presents a scathing critique of the family as an institution of capitalist indoctrination rather than emotional sanctuary. The male quartet—comprising the Father, Mother, and Two Brothers—operates as capitalism's moral police, systematically redefining traditional vices as economic failures. Through their financialized rhetoric, they transform the concept of sloth from a moral failing into a productivity deficit ("You're not generating enough income"), while constantly auditing Anna's performance through merciless accounting ("What they're sending isn't enough to build a house"). This linguistic reframing exposes how moral systems become subservient to market logic under capitalist regimes.

The family unit's physical and vocal performance further reinforces its role as an embodied control mechanism. Their homophonic vocal delivery creates a monotonous, assembly-line effect, while their rigid postures and staccato gestures precisely mimic the mechanical movements of industrial machinery. This choreographed dehumanization visually manifests how capitalist systems reduce human relationships to functional, repetitive motions. The quartet's synchronized movements and speech patterns exemplify what Brecht termed the "gestus" - a physical embodiment of social relationships that reveals their underlying power dynamics.

Most disturbingly, the work exposes how capitalism corrupts fundamental human affections. The family appropriates religious language ("Lord, enlighten our children") to sanctify their profit-driven agenda, creating a perverse theology where financial success equals moral virtue. Their expressions of familial love become explicitly transactional, with affection strictly conditional on economic remittances ("This money will build a little house"). This portrayal anticipates contemporary critiques of neoliberal subjectivity, demonstrating how market values colonize even the most intimate human connections. Set against the backdrop of Weimar Germany's collapse into fascism, the piece gains additional resonance as a warning about how economic systems reshape moral and emotional life.

[10] Cooper, Melinda, *Family Values. Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*, Zone Books, coll. „Near Futures", New York, 2017.

Conclusion: The Violence of Kindness – Performing Capitalism's Brutal Intimacies

Die sieben Todsünden culminates in a devastating revelation: the family itself—that sacrosanct unit of care—operates as capitalism's most insidious marketplace. Anna I's chilling line, *"We only do what suits each other best,"* lays bare the score's central thesis: under capitalism, even love becomes transactional, and kindness itself turns violent. As performers, we become witnesses to this betrayal, our voices tracing the contours of an economic system that distorts human relationships into exchanges of calculated value.

The work's genius lies in how it weaponizes musical beauty to expose systemic ugliness. When we sing Weill's deceptively lyrical melodies or execute Brecht's razor-sharp texts, we enact the very contradictions we critique—our artistic labor mirroring the commodification we decry. The tenor's aria dissected in this study exemplifies this paradox: the more precisely we articulate *"Pfund für Pfund,"* the more we embody the mechanized cruelty the phrase condemns. Performance thus becomes a form of complicit critique, where technical mastery serves radical revelation.

To perform *Die sieben Todsünden* today is to confront capitalism's evolved guises—where platforms monetize intimacy, and self-care becomes a branded product. The family's exploitation of Anna II in 1933 finds its echo in contemporary gig economies that disguise precarity as freedom. As artists, our task is to render these connections audible and visceral, using Weill and Brecht's score as both scalpel and mirror.

In the end, the work leaves us with a challenge: can performance transcend the systems it critiques? When we take our final bow, are we celebrating resistance or participating in capitalism's relentless capacity to absorb dissent as entertainment? Perhaps the answer lies in the discomfort we provoke—in those moments when an audience's applause falters, unsettled by the realization that they, too, are implicated in Anna's story. This is the enduring power of *Die sieben Todsünden*: it makes audible the silent violence of "kindness" in a world where everything—even art, even love—has its price.

The final irony? To perform this critique, we must sell tickets. Such is the paradox Weill and Brecht bequeath to us—not as resignation, but as relentless, necessary struggle.

In the end, the family's lack of a name is the point. They are us—when we judge, when we benefit silently, when we refuse to see.

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