

dissertations

Robert J. Dietz—*The Operatic Style of Marc Blitzstein in the American “Agit-Prop” Era*

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Edward Berlin

As part of an ongoing study of music in the United States between the World Wars, Dr. Dietz focuses in this dissertation upon the period of the Depression and on a single artistic manifestation of that era, as represented by Marc Blitzstein. The scope of the essay is exceedingly broad, encompassing social, economic, and political aspects, as well as the relevant musical and theatrical trends. This overview, an attempt to capture the very spirit of the era, is wholly appropriate, for Blitzstein was an outspoken participant in society, an artist notably conscious of his role and responsibilities.

Dr. Dietz's organization is clear and logical. As background he considers Blitzstein's early training and influences; the effect of social and economic conditions on the arts; federal support of music and theater; the influence of labor movements on theater; and the influences of Brecht, Weill, and Eisler. Following this section is an account of Blitzstein's musical and theatrical activities between 1936 and 1941 which concentrates on two stage productions, *The Cradle Will Rock* and *No for an Answer*, and a song-play for radio, *I've Got the Tune*. The final portion is devoted to an examination of the music.

The biographical outline draws upon personal papers on deposit at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, letters from Blitzstein to Dr. Dietz (1963), and published materials. It is undoubtedly the most authentic compilation of facts on the composer, and it corrects numerous errors which appear in standard reference works. However, the author sometimes fails to analyze or interpret new data he is introducing. For example, the most startling of these corrections, relegated to a footnote, is the disclosure that Blitzstein did not die in an automobile accident; rather, he was the victim of a vicious beating (p. 15, fn. 26)! But there is no further discussion or speculation on this point. What is the source of the information? Why were the newspapers misinformed? Was there an investigation? Was there any political motivation for the crime?

Of greater relevance for the present study is the examination of Blitzstein's musical training, his family background, and his moral and ethical values. As a well-rounded musician with exceptional performing abilities, he crowned his formal training, in 1926-28, by studying with both Boulanger

and Schoenberg. On his return to the United States, he was viewed as a promising young composer in the Stravinsky orbit (p. 138). That he then rejected the imposing and respected language of the avant-garde in favor of Broadway was a surprising development, but one, as the author convincingly explains, which was totally consistent with his conception of art.

Blitzstein's early life, experiences, and influences, as described by Dr. Dietz, clearly delineate the inevitability of his embrace of Marxist ideals. These ideals, however, clashed sharply with the elitist implications of his sophisticated musical style, and it was the political side of his nature which gradually became dominant. As a social visionary who would not divorce art from life, Blitzstein chose to use his music as a weapon for his ideals and to popularize his style to widen his audience. The intellectual processes which directed his musical choices are traced by Dr. Dietz through the composer's writings in such publications as *Modern Music*, *The Musical Quarterly*, *New Masses*, and *The New York Times*. At the same time the reader is made aware of the added dimension of Blitzstein as critic—a most eloquent and perceptive commentator on the then-current musical scene.

The year 1935 witnessed his active entry into "agit-prop"—agitation-propaganda—art. His first such work, "Send for the Militia," a song-skit based on a workers' insurrection in Spain in 1934, was included in *Parade*, a collectively written leftist-oriented revue. Significantly, in 1935 he also joined The Composers' Collective and renewed his acquaintance with Brecht and Eisler.

Surveying Blitzstein's creative activity, Dr. Dietz examines each of the works written between 1936 and 1941. The circumstances surrounding each composition and production are outlined, along with a synopsis of the text or dramatic action and a summary of the public and critical response. *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937) is discussed in greatest detail, for there were many extraneous events which helped to make it a spectacular success: the coincidental resemblance to a current steel dispute in which strikers were killed; its status as a production of the Federal Theater Project of the WPA and the government's attempts at censorship; the resourcefulness of director Orson Welles in leading the audience of almost 1,000 on a march up Broadway to a nongovernment theater; the union restrictions which resulted in the actors performing in the audience, and Marc Blitzstein alone providing the music from a piano on the stage.

The facts as presented are intriguing, well-researched, and documented. It is all the more curious, then, that two fairly obvious errors should appear. First, the reader is misled with the implication that Blitzstein was joined on the stage by other musicians (p. 207):

The orchestra musicians (or those who chose to participate) were not to be placed in the orchestra pit, but upon the stage, in which case they would be considered to be part of a concert. . . .

Dr. Dietz never explains that the musicians chose not to participate, the lone exception being an accordionist who joined in briefly from the audience.¹ The second error concerns a misreading of the play. Dr. Dietz designates a leitmotif for occurrences of murder and in the process rewrites the text to suit his theory (p. 298):

. . . Mr. Mister directs Dr. Specialist to tell news reporters that the murdered Joe Worker fell and was killed in the steel mill because he was intoxicated.

The text, however, states that the character was merely injured. He is referred to as “the machinist who got hurt,” and the doctor who examines him “after his injury” states, “He was obviously intoxicated” (scene 9). In addition, the injured worker’s name was Joe Hammer, not Joe Worker.

Accounts are given in less detail of Blitzstein’s incidental music for films and plays, a choral song, and a radio song-play. Most of the composer’s works were well received, and success was similarly anticipated for his second “agit-prop” opera depicting management’s abuse of workers, *No for an Answer* (1941). Despite a favorable reception from critics, however, the work was a commercial failure. Dr. Dietz concludes that the public’s desire for this type of protest theater diminished as economic conditions improved and offers a parallel in the decreased circulation of such leftist publications as *The Daily Worker* and *New Masses* (p. 277).

As with the previous opera, the discussion of *No for an Answer* is informative but also not without shortcomings, this time in the form of contradictory accounts. The reader is led to believe that Blitzstein decided to use only a piano in *No for an Answer*, following the precedent accidentally established in *The Cradle Will Rock*. On p. 262 Dr. Dietz states:

With Marc Blitzstein again at the piano—this time in the orchestra pit. . . .

And, on p. 269, there appears the following quotation from *Opera News*:

[*No for an Answer*,] played without benefit of orchestra. . . .

But then, on p. 339, one finds this unexplained statement about orchestration:

As in the two earlier “agit-prop” works, the orchestration for *No for an Answer* is not a major factor in the style.

How is this contradiction to be reconciled? And why should the reader be expected to simply accept this unsupported and undiscussed opinion?

Dr. Dietz summarizes Blitzstein’s career after 1941, indicating an abandonment of the “agit-prop” approach. According to his own testimony, Blitzstein felt that the necessity for a unified war effort outweighed all other considerations, and it was for this reason that he put his “agit-prop” activities aside. It was not long before he again addressed himself to social themes, but the problems had changed, and he adjusted accordingly. This could indeed be the subject of another dissertation.

Up to this point, Dr. Dietz's paper is to be commended for its extensive research and its generally logical presentation of facts. Beginning with the section devoted to musical analyses, however, the value of the study decreases as the flaws become more frequent and glaring. For example, it appears that Dr. Dietz was unfamiliar with the term "segue." When finding it in a Blitzstein score, he concluded not that the composer was following a traditional musical, and especially operatic, usage but that he had been influenced by his reading of radio scripts (p. 300, fn. 7):

The term "segue," common to radio scripts, is frequently used between scenes in Blitzstein's piano-vocal scores.

This misunderstanding is not an isolated instance. Furthermore, Dr. Dietz's analyses, replete with measure-counting and lengthy descriptions of stereotyped forms, lack direction and purpose. In his musical examples he frequently fails to establish any particular point and often overlooks what is significant. He does recognize that Blitzstein, in applying himself to the vernacular, brought to it a dimension not usually found on Broadway, but Dr. Dietz does not seem to show any understanding of the nature of this unique music.

Example 1, along with Dr. Dietz's comments, illustrates the lack of correspondence between example and description (p. 333):

The chorus is heard here in the unison singing of a narrow-ranged melody which centers around c' and e'. . . .

EXAMPLE 1: *No for an Answer*, II 5, mm. 4-8



Clearly, it is E \flat which is a focal point in this example, and not E. Even if one assumes that the flat was omitted through a typographical error, no centrality can be attached to the ornamental C.

He proposes Mrs. Mister's "Hard Times" song in *Cradle* as typical of Blitzstein's subtle technique, but the example again fails to establish his point (p. 305):

The refrain is twenty-six measures long and in ternary form. The meter is primarily 4/4 with an occasional 3/2 measure to accommodate the text, and the tonality is E-flat major/minor. Once more, the over-all impression is that of a commercial popular song but Blitzstein again avoided the most obvious characteristics of that song type.

What are these "most obvious characteristics" which are avoided? To the present writer, at least, the seven measures illustrated (mm. 18-24) suggest little out of the ordinary (Ex. 2).

EXAMPLE 2

Hard times I can assure you; Hard times, poor us and poor you.

Hard times; Fa-ther what can we do? _____

coll 8

acc

Rather than view the passage as a bimodal E_b , it would be more plausible to place the tonal center at D_b , interpreting the chords as: $ii-V_7$ of $V-V_7-I$. There are no meter changes shown; besides, is Dr. Dietz suggesting that a composer is so controlled by his own text that he must resort to irregular metrics to “accommodate” the words? More likely, words and music are organized to achieve a desired rhythmic effect.

On the other hand, he cites an extraordinary song (Ex. 3), but, not seeing the possibilities for discussion, he appears almost apologetic at its assumed barrenness (pp. 296–97):

The main body of the song is in strophic form, each strophe twenty-three measures long. There are no variations in the two repetitions of the original statement. Except for a slight irregularity in phrase lengths, the form and musical contents are simple and predictable. Above all there is no use of dissonance or altered tones which are not traditional . . . Blitzstein, in his enthusiasm for a new musical ideology, had proceeded farther in the direction of traditional commercial music than his creative integrity would later allow.

One could agree that “there are no variations in the two repetitions” only if the varied piano part were discarded. But beyond that, the song is rich in unexpected turns. The “slight irregularity of phrase length” is at the very heart of Blitzstein’s ability to keep the listener off balance. What starts off as an ordinary phrase in D_b suddenly cadences a beat too soon, and in the “wrong” key! The dissonant harmonization of “sure” in the following phrase extension is hardly a part of the “traditional” Broadway language, and the final cadence is again rhythmically misplaced, disrupting the anticipated equilibrium. Rather than being “simple and predictable,” this

EXAMPLE 3

The musical score consists of three systems. Each system includes a vocal line (treble clef) and piano accompaniment (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The first system has lyrics: "O, you can dream and scheme and hap-pi-ly put and take, Take". The second system has lyrics: "and put, But first be sure the nick-el's". The third system has lyrics: "un-der your foot." Musical markings include *cresc.*, *dim.*, and a triplet of eighth notes in the vocal line of the first system.

song is a classic example of Blitzstein’s disposition to affect a commonplace manner while achieving an uncommon result.

A consideration which should form a major part of any dramatic-musical examination, but which occurs only rarely here, is the relationship between music and drama. Interpretations of this type may be debatable but should still be ventured.

In commenting on the use of a chorale for Reverend Salvation’s sermons in *Cradle*, Dr. Dietz makes some valid points: the obvious significance of a religious melody in this context and the ironic comparison between the chorale’s original title, “Brunnquell aller Güter,” and the Reverend’s willingness to alter his morality for a price. He locates the source in the “69 Chorale Melodies” appended to collections of Bach chorales but neglects to mention that Blitzstein preserves the original bass line. But there are more serious flaws in the author’s analysis and interpretation, as he tends to overlook the correlation between musical device and dramatic meaning (p. 305):

The chorale melody is in two parts, each repeated, and in E minor throughout. The first appearance of each part is accompanied by the melody and bass line, without harmonization. Each repetition is harmonized in simple chordal style.

As the description is incorrect, a valid interpretation is impossible. Actually, the repetitions are not “harmonized in simple chordal style”; every other chord change is omitted! Could it not be that Blitzstein is suggesting that there is something essential lacking in the Reverend?

In a following passage, Dr. Dietz again seems to miss the dramatic context of the musical setting. When the Reverend agrees, for a substantial contribution, to alter his previous sermon and preach on the virtues of war, we hear a variation of the first chorale (p. 306):

... Blitzstein chose to introduce a contrapuntal chorale variation as accompaniment for the Reverend Salvation’s sermon. The second part is an example of Blitzstein satirically incorporating the extreme contrapuntal dissonance of those composers whose craft he admired but whose social significance he doubted.

The author wisely avoids mentioning which of the “admired” composers is being parodied, for there is no obvious candidate. Besides, there is no reason for such a parody. More likely, as the sermon is varied, so is the music. And as Christian morality is distorted by the Reverend, the chorale, representing traditional Christian values, is similarly abused with dissonance.

It is unfortunate that Dr. Dietz’s lack of success in discussing Blitzstein’s music itself detracts from the accomplishments in the earlier parts of the paper. The gathering together of factual information, the correlation with the social, political, and economic milieu, and the presentation of Blitzstein’s critical writings give this dissertation value. It is to be hoped that, should Dr. Dietz continue to examine American music between the World Wars, he will approach the musical problems with some of the ability evidenced in his research.

NOTE

¹ *Marc Blitzstein Discusses His Theater Compositions*, Spoken Arts 717. Dr. Dietz is aware of this recording and mentions it on p. 311, but he does not list it in his sources.

[*Ed. Note*: Musical examples are quoted from the dissertation of Dr. Dietz, who based them on the manuscript scores. The examples are used by permission of the executors of the Estate of Marc Blitzstein. *The Cradle Will Rock* copyright © 1938, 1964, and *No for an Answer* copyright © 1941, 1969. Edward Davis, and Josephine Davis, Executors of the Estate of Marc Blitzstein.]