

# MARC BLITZSTEIN: HIS LIFE, HIS WORK, HIS WORLD

Howard Pollack [Oxford University Press]

By Mark Zuckerman

Perhaps the greatest irony for American composer Marc Blitzstein (1905–1964) – in a life and career laden with ironies – is that his biggest critical and monetary success came not from any of his many substantial original works, but from his Off Broadway adaptation of the 1929 *Die Dreigroschenoper* by German dramatist Bertolt Brecht and composer Kurt Weill. Indeed, *The Threepenny Opera*, which premiered in 1954, had many times more performances and generated many times more royalties for Blitzstein than all of his other works combined. Even though the underlying work is not his own, Blitzstein's contribution to *The Threepenny Opera* exhibits qualities that distinguish his catalog of original work for the stage, comprising most of his surviving output: facility with language, fluency in a multitude of musical idioms, mastery of dramatic structure, and proclivity for social commentary.

Blitzstein was a piano prodigy in a Jewish Philadelphia family with a father devoted to left wing causes and a mother with family ties to the Yiddish theater, heritages that informed his composition. In his home town, he attended the University of Pennsylvania and the Curtis Institute of Music and went abroad to study (albeit briefly) with both Nadia Boulanger and Arnold Schoenberg. He proved gifted and creative at languages, especially his own; in addition to his singable American translations of foreign language songs, he wrote most of the words he set to music. His music demonstrates considerable versatility, equally adept and effective in both cabaret and art song and in both popular musical theater and grand opera.

Although he was well versed in the music of his time and wrote and lectured about it extensively, he decried the modernist “art for art’s sake” movement and felt his music should communicate issues of social importance. He was involved for a time with communism and worked all his life for leftist causes, both with and outside his music. He had a penchant for satire and wit, aimed frequently at what he saw as social evils, particularly capitalism and racism. He wrote equally well for inexperienced singers – like actors, in the case of *The Cradle Will Rock*, or amateur chorus, as in *Symphony: The Airborne* – and seasoned professionals, as in his most performed opera, *Regina*, based on Lillian Hellman’s play *The Little Foxes*. His work was innovative, blending speech with song with shades in between and using popular idioms for dramatic effect: revealing character and evocative of time and place. His musical theater pieces frequently defied genre, as evidenced by reviews from both drama and music critics.

In short, Marc Blitzstein appears to be the ideal composer for the many music lovers who decry the state of modern American music as narcissistic and academic and seek genuine spirits who try to connect with audiences – yet he doesn’t seem to be.

It wasn’t as if Blitzstein’s career didn’t parallel others’ of his generation. Like his fellow Curtis alumnus Samuel Barber, Blitzstein joined the Army Air Corps in World War II – though of the music each wrote for the service, Barber’s *Commando March* is still performed while Blitzstein’s *Airborne Symphony* far less so. Like Virgil Thomson and Aaron Copland, Blitzstein wrote literate,

penetrating music criticism and also scores for documentary films. Like Copland, Blitzstein was active in social causes and in organizing composers – both were charter members of American Composers Alliance, though, as ASCAP affiliates, both had to leave when ACA associated with BMI. Like Bernard Hermann, Blitzstein wrote incidental music for Orson Welles’ theatrical productions. Both Blitzstein and Leonard Bernstein, a Blitzstein acolyte, came to popular musical theater from a classical background. And like other theatrical craftsmen of Jewish heritage, like Frank Loesser, Richard Rodgers, and Oscar Hammerstein II – all of whom credited Blitzstein as an influence – Blitzstein wrote for Broadway.

Yet among this company, Blitzstein remains virtually unknown by comparison, a situation biographer Howard Pollack attempts to rectify in his thoroughly researched, comprehensive (and 500+ page) *Marc Blitzstein: His Life, His Work, His World* (Oxford University Press).

Pollack uses the fruits of his research to illuminate the highways and byways – both personal and musical – of Blitzstein’s colorful and eventful journey. He details Blitzstein’s early life and his special relationship with his sister, Jo. He speaks frankly about Blitzstein’s homosexual liaisons – some long term and some casual, like the one resulting in Blitzstein’s murder in Martinique – and his marriage – a love match even though he was gay – to Eva Goldbeck, who died of anorexia in 1936. He reveals the complexities of Blitzstein’s friendships – in particular with Kurt Weill, who regarded Blitzstein as a mediocre copycat up until the time Weill agreed to the *Threepenny Opera* project, and with Leonard

Bernstein, with whom he had a supportive and competitive relationship – and collaborations, both failed (as with Jerome Robbins) and successful (as with Orson Welles). Blitzstein knew a lot of fascinating people, and with him as a vector Pollack reveals much about them.

Blitzstein’s world was just as fascinating, especially since so much of it was tied up with his work. His studies brought him to the Europe of Boulanger and Schoenberg in the 1920s. Back in the U.S. in the 1930s, he became involved in the communist movement and wrote music for political events. He was stationed in London during World War II, where he composed his *Airborne Symphony* and worked with a chorus of Negro soldiers. In the late 1940s and 1950s he was in New York City, creating his most mature work (like *Regina* and *Threepenny Opera*) and active in the anti House Un American Activities Committee movement (he eventually testified in front of HUAC, admitting his lapsed Communist Party membership but refusing to name names of anyone else, unlike Jerome Robbins, among others). Pollack offers evocative descriptions of the artistic cauldron that simmered around Blitzstein wherever he was at the time.

But Pollack’s main focus – as it should be – is on Blitzstein’s work. The book’s structure is

chronological, and Pollack introduces Blitzstein’s work as part of the historical narrative. This succeeds particularly well in the chapter devoted to Blitzstein’s critical writings in the 1930s, illustrated with a judicious selection of Blitzstein’s reviews. Talking about Blitzstein’s music presents a greater challenge, one that Pollack meets with thoroughness and insight. For each piece, Pollack reports the genesis and evolution, outlines a synopsis (for the dramatic works), provides an analysis of the score, excerpts critical reaction, and details the performance history, listing the complete cast from performances involving Blitzstein and occasionally some that didn’t. This works best for the more celebrated pieces, like *The Cradle Will Rock* and *Regina*, whose genesis stories are most interesting and the cast more familiar. It works particularly well for *Cradle*, where the suspenseful story of its premiere – thwarting the attempt to suppress it by the Federal Theater Project, which had, ironically, commissioned it – was the subject of a 1999 Tim Robbins film.

But sometimes this thoroughness impedes the narrative, as with the discussion of Blitzstein’s earlier pieces. For example, it may be historically interesting to learn that Imogene Coca, who later co starred with Sid Caesar on *Your Show of*

*Shows* on 1950s television, made her debut in Blitzstein’s *Triple Sec* in 1930; but it’s only being academically rigorous to recite the entire first cast, few (if any) of whom would be recognized by the normal reader. It’s a pity the physical book medium doesn’t allow for hypertext, so the reader could control seeing these details; failing that, however, the best place for this kind of information would be an appendix. However, the book has no appendix, though a catalog of work and a discography (especially in view of how sparse it would be) would have been helpful. The reader could use as a companion Leonard Lehrman’s *Marc Blitzstein: a Bio Bibliography* (Praeger, 2005), if they can find it (or afford it – it’s \$125).

Despite these occasional bumps in the road, Pollack treats us to an eventful and rewarding voyage of immersion into the life and work of an important American composer. To say that Marc Blitzstein is undeservedly neglected unfortunately does not distinguish him from very many other fine American composers, especially those of his generation. Happily, it appears Howard Pollack is on a mission to correct this situation with an extensive biographical series on American composers, of which *Marc Blitzstein: His Life, His Work, His World* is a superb example. ■

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