A PERFORMER’S GUIDE TO THE AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATER SONGS OF KURT WEILL (1900-1950)

by

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As member of the Document Committee, we certify that we have read document prepared by Robin Lee Morales entitled A Performer’s Guide to the American Musical Theater Songs of Kurt Weill (1900-1950) and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the document requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts.

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SIGNED: Robin L. W. Morales
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DEDICATION

To my family

And our tree of musicians past, present and future

With special memories of

My grandparents, Raymond and Doris Williams and

My father-in-law Jesus Vega Morales
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II. ABSTRACT

With the broadening interest and popularity of musical theater studies in academic degree programs, more teachers of classical singing and students are meeting at the crossroads of conventional vocal study to broaden their skills in non-classical and musical theater techniques. Tracing back through the lineage of American musical theater, a fascinating example of vocal style emerges from the musical theater works of Kurt Weill. Weill’s music exhibits operatic lyricism, jazz rhythms, and popular idioms but does not conform strictly to light opera, jazz, or popular music.

In America, Kurt Weill was a successful musical theater composer by 1941 and was highly respected on Broadway. Simplicity and comprehensibility were his stylistic objectives in transforming operatic forms into a viable musical theater that would appeal to the greater public. His work in musical theater resulted in an extensive repertory of songs suitable for all voice types, one that was of considerable significance in the evolution of American theater and singing styles.

Weill’s American musical theater songs convey a communicative style that requires a technique grounded in the speech-based lyricism of celebrated jazz singers and singing-actors from musical theater’s golden era (roughly 1927 to 1960). A deeper understanding of Kurt Weill’s American theater songs will clarify the defining qualities of his musical style and suggest a more informed artistic approach for singers, teachers, coaches, and accompanists of musical theater repertoire.
III. WEILL SCHOLARSHIP IN REVIEW

Much of the previous scholarship regarding Kurt Weill understates and almost dismisses the fourteen years he composed for the commercial theater and film industry as an American citizen.\(^1\) However, more recent scholarship suggests Weill’s works tested the Broadway institution and its audience to an extent not seen again until the 1970’s productions of Stephen Sondheim and Harold Prince, in which the principles and conventions of musical theater further extended the capabilities of the form.\(^2\) Research up to 1980 has been described as problematic in its attempts to evaluate Weill’s American music by the same aesthetic criteria used for his European music.\(^3\) Scholars neglected to acknowledge the cultural context in which he worked to attain success and popularity in America.\(^4\) David Drew’s entry in the 1980 edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* asserts that there were “two Weills” in terms of compositional output and methodology.\(^5\) Contrary to that claim, Stephen Hinton’s research cited in the 1992 edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* argues that categorization of “two Weills” in terms of his music output radically misconstrues the


\(^3\) Hinton.


composer’s development. Scholars have since recognized the need for classification of Weill’s works in terms of genre rather than a stylistic category and in relation to the historical context in which he developed his compositions, “without seeking to elevate one culture above another.”

Drew’s, *Kurt Weill: A Handbook*, is a catalog of Weill’s work presenting both a detailed chronology and a classified list of works according to genre. A full-length critical study, *KurtWeill in Europe* by Kowalke covers the period up to 1935, the year Weill immigrated to the United States, including analysis of music and translations of 27 of the composer’s most important essays. Biographies on Weill include Schebera’s *Kurt Weill: An Illustrated Life*, which is a translated revision of the 1983 German biography that includes material that had been unavailable in its previous edition, including unique photographs and a selected discography. Schebera avoids comparison of the European and American works, in contrast to earlier references. Farneth’s book presents a visual overview in a documentary style that reflect the stages of Weill’s career with emphasis on the development and reception of works, including reviews, performance programs, and annotated libretto drafts. Taylor devotes a few chapters to the American years and

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emphasizes background in Weill’s studies with his composition teachers.\textsuperscript{12} Collections of scholarly essays which include some aspects of the American works can be found in \textit{A New Orpheus: Essays on Kurt Weill} \textsuperscript{13} and \textit{A Stranger Here Myself: Kurt Weill Studien},\textsuperscript{14} both edited by Kowalke. These essays provide insight largely into the contextual considerations of the European theatrical works. American works are allocated to a few pages with little enthusiasm and few musical examples. Foster Hirsch’s \textit{Kurt Weill on Stage From Berlin to Broadway},\textsuperscript{15} published in 2002 is the most recent biography apportioned with significant emphasis on Weill’s experiences in America, a chronology of Weill’s professional activities with first-hand accounts from conductors, performers and others.

Since the centennial of Weill’s birth in the year 2000, which prompted several international celebrations and events in honor of his work, other articles have surfaced along with more revivals of his musical theater works produced by both European and American opera companies. Articles, interviews, and information on current performances, productions, and various scholarly observations relevant to Weill can be found in the \textit{Kurt Weill Newsletter}, published by the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music. The Weill-Lenya Research Center in New York and \textit{The Papers of Kurt Weill and Lotte}\textsuperscript{16}

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{14} Kim H. Kowalke and Horst Edler, eds., \textit{A Stranger Here Myself: Kurt Weill Studien} (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1993).
\textsuperscript{15} Foster Hirsch, \textit{Kurt Weill on Stage, From Berlin to Broadway} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2002)

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*Lenya* in the Irving S. Gilmore Library at Yale University are valuable resources for research. The archive houses a collection of Weill’s personal documents, manuscript scores and sketches of music, correspondence, programs, clippings, and documented interviews.

Whether everything Weill wrote in America is fundamentally different from his European compositions is a central question in Weill scholarship today. Although this document does not attempt to answer that question, this author hopes that it will serve as a reference for others to whom it is a central question. A more in depth understanding of Weill’s musical language may serve those who wish to draw more informed comparisons between Kurt Weill’s American songs and the European songs.

Although the scholarly sources mentioned above provide interesting discoveries about the composer’s career and his musical approach, they do not provide detailed stylistic analysis of the American songs. This document will supplement past research on Weill’s American music through analysis that suggests a more informed artistic approach for singers.

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IV. KURT WEILL STYLE: A SOURCE FOR BROADENING VOCAL TECHNIQUE

Although he was one of the most influential composers in musical theater, Kurt Weill lived only fifty years, from 1900 to 1950, “and yet seems to have affected everybody’s thinking about music’s place in the theater.”\(^\text{17}\) From the earliest successes of his career in Berlin, Weill was either heralded or criticized for a compositional style that integrated the aesthetics of serious and popular music. Weill’s experimentation in musical theater forms resulted in works that reflected current times. In America Weill continued to reach out to a broad audience and focused almost exclusively on American themes to create an art form uniquely different from the old countries.\(^\text{18}\) Weill’s works exhibit operatic lyricism, jazz rhythms, “blue” notes, and popular idioms but do not conform strictly to light opera, jazz, or popular music.

Now, more than half a century after his death, Weill’s unique style continues to make an impact on vocal music. His songs have been performed by a diverse array of musicians from rock groups, avant-garde ensembles, opera companies, and Broadway and film stars, including Angelica Huston’s grandfather, Walter Huston.\(^\text{19}\) One of the incidental numbers from his opera Street Scene was “evocative enough to become an

instant musical icon of ‘cool’ and danger” and was later used in the James Bond 007 movie theme.\textsuperscript{20} Simplicity and comprehensibility were Weill’s stylistic objectives in transforming traditional operatic forms into a viable musical theater that would appeal to the greater public.

Weill is commonly known as the counterpart to Bertolt Brecht’s epic theater in Weimar-era Berlin and the composer of “Mack the Knife.” Yet, he collaborated with more than 25 world-class poets, playwrights and lyricists in Europe and the United States. Weill’s list of renowned collaborators includes Georg Kaiser, Jacques Deval, Maxwell Anderson, Ira Gershwin, Sam Coslow, Alan Jay Lerner and Langston Hughes. Through their words, Weill’s melodies convey a natural, communicative vocal style that is grounded in the speech-based lyricism of popular singing-actors from musical theater’s golden era (1927 to 1960).

The purpose of this document is to identify in Weill’s American songs features rooted in both classical and popular vocal idioms that illuminate his style so that teachers, coaches, singers, and accompanists can develop a more authentic approach for musical theater styles and more readily include his songs in their repertoire.

A Broader Scope for Singers and Teachers

Within the voice teaching field today, there is a growing fascination with musical theater and non-classical singing styles as well as contemporary commercial music.

According to the *Journal of Singing* published by the National Association of Teachers of Singing, there is a phenomenal demand for vocal instruction in techniques required for the hybrid forms of musical theater works, not to mention the magnetic popularity of the “star” search reality shows which today profess that “any pop-belter with a body microphone can be a Broadway star.” Recognizing the attraction and development of musical theater curriculums in colleges and universities, NATS now sponsors a corresponding category in vocal competitions. Broadway itself recently has widened its scope of repertoire by staging productions such as Puccini’s classic opera, *La Bohème*.

While consensus generally exists about what represents fine operatic singing, there is much less consensus about singing in the American musical theater. Yet, the allure of musical theater songs and “crossover” recordings is a developing trend, with many vocalists perhaps unaware of the past tradition of “crossover singers” from opera to musical theater stage and film. Singers who actually performed in musical theater and popular events during its golden era included Metropolitan Opera’s John Reardon, Helen Traubel, Brian Sullivan, Rïse Stevens, and Ezio Pinza. Before widespread amplification in the theater, when Rodgers and Hart and the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals prevailed, the techniques of singing on the opera stage and Broadway were not fundamentally different. Then, singers were expected to project their voices to the back

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23 Tommasini.
of the theater with clarity and intelligibility of the lyric.\textsuperscript{25} Broadway producers even hired diction coaches for both the cast and chorus to ensure each syllable could be understood from the stage.\textsuperscript{26} Cole Porter was obsessive about audiences hearing his lyrics and preferred singers with impeccable diction.\textsuperscript{27}

Musical theater specialists today, however, stress that voice technique “necessary to sing in these styles, while rooted in the classical tradition, is significantly different from classical production in both pedagogy and style.”\textsuperscript{28} Conversely, some teachers of classical voice are urging singers to explore a more expressive delivery style, rooted in the communication of words and meaning reflected in the approach of popular singers.\textsuperscript{29} This converging of techniques, together with the increase and popularity of musical theater studies developing in academic degree programs, means more and more teachers of classical singing and students are meeting at the crossroads of conventional vocal study to broaden their skills to include musical theater techniques.

An authentic approach to vocal skill should not only identify the distinct styles but also should provide a method and a broad scope of repertoire.\textsuperscript{30} There remains an intriguing paradox regarding the aesthetic differences in singing techniques between classical and musical theater styles. Moreover, this also provides an opportunity for

\begin{itemize}
\item[27] Ethan Mordden, \textit{Beautiful Mornin’ The Broadway Musical in the 1940s} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 254.
\end{itemize}
teachers and singers to explore uncharted territory in the classical voice studio, song styles from America’s own popular musical heritage. Tracing back through the lineage of American musical theater, a fascinating example of vocal style emerges from the musical theater works of the 1940s. Whether exploring the fundamental distinctions of style techniques or the subtle differences between classical and musical theater singing, no music awakens those differences more than the American theater songs of Kurt Weill.

Why Weill Now?

Primarily an opera composer, Weill brought inimitable flair to 1940s Broadway. Not only did he incorporate aspects of popular music in his scores, but more surprisingly, he integrated the style of popular singing to his works. When he addressed the actor-singers of the established Group Theater in 1936 in preparation for the musical play *Johnny Johnson* (with Paul Green), Weill stressed the difference between “singing for the voice and singing for the word,” and using the voice in a more natural way to carry the word through the melody of the song.\(^{31}\) He urged his singers to “pay attention to the phrasing of the word, not [so much] the melodic line.”\(^{32}\)

Remarkably, his instructions provide a clear perspective on the primary approach for singing in traditional American musical theater. Weill’s musical approach reveals a

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\(^{31}\) MSS 30, The Papers of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya.  
\(^{32}\) Ibid.
unique blending of the classical voice range with the more popular communicative speech-derived style. It was a style that had come to fruition in musical theater by the 1930s, influenced by Irish patter songs and African-American blues and jazz.\textsuperscript{33}

Pedagogical Considerations

In view of the Broadway scene today, a wide scope of singing styles are required that include everything from traditional legit, contemporary legit, traditional belt, and contemporary belt.\textsuperscript{34} Voice specialist Robert Edwin aptly describes the legit style as Broadway’s shorthand for “legitimate,” referring to singing in a classical or operatic manner with vocal properties including fullness of tone, chiaroscuro (a blend of bright and warm tones), clarity of diction (a studied articulation of vowels and consonants) more sung than spoken, and an active vibrato throughout. Legit also implies head-voice dominance for women and a more formal use of chest and head registers (as in classical technique) for men.

While traditional legit “favors a sound that is decidedly classical in nature (heard in most musicals prior to the 1960s),” contemporary legit “is less formal and more speech-like in sound,” maintaining some classical characteristics such as vibrato and chiaroscuro, “but can also include pop and rock-influenced sounds.”\textsuperscript{35} The belt voice or “belt-mix,” emphasizes a more informal style of speech and phrasing with intensified


\textsuperscript{34} Edwin, “A Broader Broadway,” 431.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
vocal brightness and clarity as opposed to round, warm tones. Belt “requires the use of a more chest voice dominant tone” for women, but for men, requires “a narrowing and brightening of the classical sound, again with the emphasis on more informal, speech-like phrasing, but still utilizing the same registers used for classical repertoire.”


In defense of the broadening interest and criteria in contemporary vocal music, Edwin advises, it is crucial that voice teachers “acknowledge the physiological and stylistic differences between classical and non-classical singing, and adjust our pedagogy accordingly.” The primary aesthetic in classical singing is the consistency of tone production while articulation is a secondary consideration. The primary aesthetic in musical theater, however, emphasizes articulation: words and meaning as the primary criteria for developing an expressive persona. To cite the singer, teacher and scholar Richard Miller, “Good breath management and the ability to sustain and to move the voice, to play with resonance balances, and to produce understandable diction are

37 Edwin, 432.
essential elements of every vocal idiom.”

Traditional practice in classical voice teaching asserts that tone production is the musical use of the voice while articulation is the communicative use, and that singing requires both at the same time.

Without differentiating between singing styles, William Vennard proposed that the singer’s aim is “to find a diction that is as clear as speech, that gives the illusion of being the same, but is really quite otherwise….To sound ‘natural’ will require studied artifice.”

Certainly, it should be understood then, that the choice of a particular technique for performance depends on the emphasis desired, the primary objective and the setting of the event. While both classical and musical theater styles are achieved through skill in vocal pliancy, musical theater technique requires a precision in singing on and through specific consonants to express the rhythm, meaning and nuance of words. The musical theater singer should never allow vocal technique to interfere with a text’s intelligibility or dramatic veracity, but strive instead to sound natural and convey the meaning of the song, with rhythmic surety and subtle nuance while remaining faithful to the notated melody.

Clearly, musical theater styles are often misrepresented or misunderstood. Further confusion may involve the extended voice techniques or effects that define contemporary popular styles such as rock, gospel or rhythm and blues that are required in

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many contemporary musicals. “[Such] voice qualities can be breathy, raspy, whiny and nasal,” emphasizing the special effects of the voice quality itself.\textsuperscript{42} However, much of American musical theater singing is an extension of classical technique that requires a more conversational, oratorical approach to text, an almost imperceptible shifting between speaking and singing. The difficulty may not be in recognizing the distinctions of styles, but rather in the approach to repertoire and the techniques for sounding natural. Vennard’s “studied artifice” can be effectively realized in Kurt Weill’s American songs, which require a straightforward, natural technique influenced by the articulation of commercial jazz era (late 1930s to 1950s) singers such as Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole.

\textsuperscript{42} Edwin, “A Broader Broadway,” 432.
V. THE COMPOSER AND HIS MILIEU

A Brief Biography

Kurt Weill was born in 1900 in Dessau, Germany and began his career in the early 1920’s after a musical upbringing and several years of study in Berlin. By the time his first opera, Der Protagonist (with librettist Georg Kaiser), was performed in April 1926, he was already well-established and respected as one of the leading composers of his generation, along with Paul Hindemith and Ernst Krenek. Artistic experiments characterized by struggles for new harmonic and melodic means of expression marked his work between 1923 and 1925.

Weill’s early works reveal the influence of modernist aesthetics, post-romanticism, expressionism, and atonality. But a “freer, lighter, and simpler” music became the greater influence. Fascinated by the rising musical culture of jazz, Weill began to incorporate elements of American jazz and popular dance rhythms into his early one-act operas Royal Palace (1927) and Der Zar lässt sich photographieren (The Czar has his Photograph Taken, 1928). By this time in his career, Weill’s use of popular music idioms had become one of the fundamental strategies in his attempts to reform contemporary music theater.

His works with poet and director Bertold Brecht, most notably their scandalous epic theater production of Die Dreigroschenoper (The Threepenny Opera,1928), brought

44 Kurt Weill Foundation for Music.
Weill not only financial success, but popular recognition as well. The work incorporates many elements of popular musical idioms, and in fact produced commercial hits in Germany such as “Mackie Messer” and the “Barbara-Song.”

Other important works include the Violin Concerto and the cantata Der neue Orpheus (1925); the school-opera Der Jasager and the radio cantata Das Berliner Requiem (1930). Weill considered the operas Die Burgschaft (The Pledge, with Caspar Neher, 1931) and Der Silbersee (The Silver Lake, 1932) as a refinement of his musical language into what he called “a thoroughly responsible style,” appropriate for the political climate and timely topics he addressed.

These later works outraged the Nazis, who orchestrated riots and propaganda campaigns against further productions. By this time Weill was celebrated as Germany’s leading composer for the theatre, one who had narrowed the divide between the formalities of opera and more popular kinds of musical performance.  With Hitler’s ascent in 1933, Weill fled Germany for Paris. There, he continued his compositional endeavors (between 1933 and 1935) with several cabaret-style chansons, the ballet-opera Die sieben Todsünden (The Seven Deadly Sins, 1933) and the score for Jacques Deval’s theatrical work Marie Galante, a work composed before he moved to the United States in 1935.

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Once in the U.S., Weill discovered there was little public interest in his European works. Quick to recognize this, he was prepared to make changes in his musical language to attract a wider audience by absorbing traits of American popular music, primarily swing and blues, without compromising his artistic integrity.\textsuperscript{47} In a letter to his wife, Lotte Lenya, Weill reported on his meeting to persuade Marlene Dietrich to play the title role in \textit{One Touch of Venus} (1943):

Marlene liked the music, but started that old business about the different quality of my music here in America. I cut it short by saying: ‘Never mind those old German songs—We’re in America now and Broadway is tougher than the Kurfürstendamm.’ That stopped her.\textsuperscript{48}

Other important stage works include \textit{Lady in the Dark} (with Moss Hart and Ira Gershwin 1941), and \textit{One Touch of Venus} (with S.J. Perelman and Odgen Nash, 1943). Considered the first real successor to Gershwin’s \textit{Porgy and Bess} (1935) was Weill’s \textit{Street Scene} (with Elmer Rice and Langston Hughes, 1947) which revealed his range of operatic-style compositions. The school-opera \textit{Down in the Valley} (1948) received hundreds of productions in schools and communities throughout the nation. \textit{Lost in the Stars} (Maxwell Anderson, 1949) was the last completed stage work. He did not claim to be observant of the Jewish religion in which in he was raised, but he composed a number of “Jewish” works, most notably \textit{The Eternal Road} (1935) with Franz Werfel, which was

\textsuperscript{47} Kim H. Kowalke, “Kurt Weill’s American Dreams,” \textit{Theater} 30.3 (2002): 76.
produced in New York in 1937. It was this production, a grand pageant based on the Old Testament, which brought Weill to the United States.

Once in America Weill applied for citizenship and became immersed into American culture. After that Weill no longer considered himself a German composer. Weill married the actress Lotte Lenya in 1926. They maintained a close relationship throughout his life despite their divorce in 1933. They were remarried in 1937. He and Lenya became American citizens in 1943.

During World War II, Weill contributed extensively to various war efforts and initiated musical projects intended to boost the nation’s morale. Incidentally, Weill was the first composer to win the Tony Award and the first composer-member and chairman of the influential Playwrights Dramatist Guild. Weill orchestrated most all his own musical scores, an unseen commodity on Broadway since Victor Herbert. In 1950 Weill, began work on a musical adaptation of Mark Twain’s novel *Huckleberry Finn*, a work intended for baritone Lawrence Tibbett. On April 3, 1950, Weill died of heart failure.

The stages of Weill’s career are unified by certain common elements: a continuous pursuit of highly-regarded playwrights and lyricists, the insistence on contemporary subject matter, and the ability to adapt to the tastes of audiences no matter where he worked.\(^{49}\) Most notably, Weill’s reputation continues to grow as more of his music is discovered and performed.

\(^{49}\) The Kurt Weill Foundation.
Works with Bertolt Brecht

Weill first collaborated with Bertolt Brecht in 1927 on a commission from the Baden-Baden Music Festival which resulted in two different versions setting the “Mahagonny” poems. Their work was a scandalous success that “seemed calculated to shock the avant-garde; the charge that he had ‘sold-out’ to commercialism and abandoned art followed him thereafter.” Compositions considered derisive or brash like The Threepenny Opera (1928) and Happy End (1929) had exploited an aggressive song style written for singing actors in the commercial theater. Yet a more natural, classic vocal style is characteristic of other works with Brecht, such as the radio cantatas Der Lindberghflug (The Lindbergh Flight, 1929) and Das Berliner Requiem (1929), Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny (Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny, 1930) and the school-opera Der Jasager (He Who Says Yes, 1930).

The hallmarks of composition in Weill’s stage works with Brecht included American jazz rhythms, tangos, modern waltz styles, etc. Famous songs include Mack the Knife, Canon Song and Lotte Lenya’s trademark song Pirate Jenny, as well as Surabaya Johnny and Bilbao Song. The collaboration with Brecht ended around 1930 for artistic, ideological, and personal reasons as a result of Brecht’s restriction of the role of music in his proposed theater projects. Weill briefly renewed his partnership with Brecht in Paris for two frustrating years in collaboration for Die Sieben Todsunden (The

Seven Deadly Sins, 1933), “a ballet with singing” for the George Balanchine ballet company.

Works with American Collaborators

Weill’s American career was as active as his European career. In New York, Weill vigilantly studied American culture and folk music, popular song forms and the latest dance crazes, the jitterbug and boogie-woogie. Before, only rhythms and sounds he perceived to be jazz were incorporated into his music. Now, he was able to experience the culture firsthand. Meanwhile, the prominent Group Theatre recruited Weill to collaborate with distinguished playwright Paul Green for the musical play Johnny Johnson (1936). Although the score was recognizably European in much of its musical traits, it established Weill on the American scene.  

By 1937 Weill had two works running simultaneously in New York. Encouraged by his positive reception and convinced that Broadway offered more artistic possibilities than did conservative opera houses in either Europe or America, Weill and Lenya decided to stay in the United States; they accordingly remarried and applied for American citizenship. He found work for a period in Hollywood, completed two film scores, Fritz Lang’s You and Me (1938) and Where Do We Go From Here? (1945) with Ira Gershwin, but became discouraged by the industry’s indifference to the type of film-opera he had envisioned, and thereafter considered Broadway “home.” “It wouldn’t be so much fun if

52 Hirsch, 148.
it weren’t so dangerous, so unpredictable,” he wrote to Lenya. “Of course, it is safer to work in the movies. But how dull, how uninspiring!”

The following decade established Weill as a new and original voice in the American musical theater. He continued to enlist the finest contemporary playwrights and lyricists for the cause of musical theater, including the foremost playwright of the day, Maxwell Anderson. Their first work, *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938), was a modest success but produced Weill’s first American “standard,” *September Song*. Before his first hit musical, *Lady in the Dark* (1941), created in collaboration with Ira Gershwin and Moss Hart, Weill had three shows in New York and contributed the score for a pageant in the 1939 New York World’s Fair. *Lady in the Dark*, a musical play about psychoanalysis, was considered a bold experiment with most of the music restricted to dream sequences, “a technique analogous to the use of color in *The Wizard of Oz*.” The show proved to be a critical and commercial success with exciting and exceptional performances by Gertrude Lawrence and Danny Kaye.

Weill had quickly acquired the reputation of being the finest craftsman in the business, no less for his large scale musical forms than his unique insistence on orchestrating all of his own works. Broadway author, Martin Gottfried expressed the following scenario:

54 The Kurt Weill Foundation.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
The period was alive with change. In 1940, Rodgers and Hart’s *Pal Joey* introduced cynicism to the wonderful world of musical comedy. Three years later, *Oklahoma!* set the theater to talking about integrated lyrics and ballet sequences. Sandwiched between these two productions, *Lady in the Dark* pioneered the use of long musical sequences. Of these three shows, *Oklahoma!* had the greatest appeal during wartime years. It was cheerful and besides, though the least sophisticated, it was, overall, the best show. But *Lady in the Dark* was the most interesting in terms of structural innovation, which is why it seems more contemporary decades later.\(^{57}\)

*One Touch of Venus* (1943, book by S.J. Perelman) with lyrics by Ogden Nash was an even greater success, with some classic hit songs as *My Foolish Heart* and *Speak Low*, and a star-making performance by Mary Martin. This show earned a place in the history of musical theater for Agnes de Mille’s groundbreaking choreography and added to Weill’s credibility in the business. “He had visual knowledge, visual imagination. Weill composed to exact counts…Richard Rodgers did better tunes but didn’t begin to have his musicianship.”\(^{58}\) 1945 saw the opening and closing of Weill’s only “flop” entitled *The Firebrand of Florence* (with Ira Gershwin). In later years whenever the production was mentioned, Weill’s response was “ouch!” The music received highly favorable reviews but there were many production problems.

Weill’s influence in the Playwrights Guild brought Elmer Rice’s Pulitzer-Prize winning drama *Street Scene* to Broadway as Weill’s American opera. *Street Scene* (1947), with lyrics by the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, considered the first

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\(^{58}\) Quoted in Hirsch, 222.
real successor to Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*, earned more favorable reviews and a more performances.\(^5^9\) *Love Life* (1948), an original and seminal “concept musical” with Alan Jay Lerner chronicled the impact of 150 years of “progress” on marriage and family. Considered the first concept musical, scholars have acknowledged its legacy on Stephen Sondheim’s *Cabaret* (1965) and works of others such as Bob Fosse and Kander & Ebb.\(^6^0\)

Weill’s last Broadway work was the musical tragedy *Lost in the Stars* (1949), based on Alan Paton’s famous novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. An influential choral drama, starring Todd Duncan and directed by Rouben Mamoulian, *Lost in the Stars* challenged the conventions and audiences of Broadway to a degree unsurpassed until the 1970s collaborative musicals of Sondheim and Hal Prince.\(^6^1\)

Gershwin and Lerner had the most Americanizing affect on Weill.\(^6^2\) Their experience on Broadway provided him a clear understanding of American style, gesture, and nuance to which he could adapt quickly. Over the course of Weill’s career he worked among major composers including Cole Porter, Vernon Duke, Hoagy Carmichael, and Richard Rodgers. The performers with whom he came in contact included stars such as Bert Lahr and Beatrice Lillie, Ethel Merman, Bob Hope, Jimmy Durante, Walter Huston, Gertrude Lawrence, Danny Kaye, Marlene Dietrich, Paul Robeson, Ray Middleton, Nanette Fabray, Susanna Foster and Mary Martin.

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\(^5^9\) The Kurt Weill Foundation.  
\(^6^0\) The Kurt Weill Foundation.  
\(^6^1\) Hinton, “Weill, Kurt,” *Grove Music Online*.  
\(^6^2\) Gottfried, 261.
Lenya, it should be pointed out, was perhaps the most supportive collaborator. Her natural instincts for acting and her unrefined singing style had always impressed Weill. Keeping herself in the background, Lenya supported Weill in all his business endeavors. In rehearsals Lenya often provided other performers the insight for finding the right way to sell a song.\textsuperscript{63} She did not pursue her own singing career in the states while Weill was alive, a decision mostly due to poor reviews for her performance in \textit{Firebrand of Florence}, the one show she had hoped would promote her as an actress in the states.\textsuperscript{64} For a period in 1938, she performed in a New York nightclub that catered to the international crowd. Lenya’s heavy German accent and a light soprano voice [unlike the low sinuous quality of Marlene Dietrich’s voice,] was not especially enjoyed by American audiences at the time.\textsuperscript{65}

Weill’s Influence and Reception in America

Exotic and tender, passionate and carefree, biting and languorous, these defining qualities have created both charm and a sense of duality in his music. A very telling analogy referring to a recent production of the Weill-Brecht work, \textit{Happy End}, was that hearing its music was like “eating chocolate and having your teeth cleaned at the same time.”\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{63} Hirsch, 228.
\textsuperscript{64} Kowalke, “Looking Back: Toward a New Orpheus,” 11.
\textsuperscript{65} Symonette and Kowalke, eds., \textit{Speak Low}, 264.
\textsuperscript{66} Feingold, “The Paradox Man.”
Weill’s legacy is in fact broad because of his experimentation in form for musical theater, more precisely, American opera that could artfully reflect current times. He had an enormous influence on modern concept-musicals that resulted in shows such as *Cabaret, Chicago, Company, Follies* and *Sweeney Todd*.67 Besides Oscar Hammerstein, it was Weill’s influence with acclaimed playwrights that placed the dramatic book (the script or libretto) at the fulcrum of American musical theater.68

In America today, new musical theater works are derived from the elements of American operetta which combined the closed form dialogue-and-song traditions and the elevated book musicals of Rodgers-Hammerstein, Lerner-Loewe, Weill, and others.

The essentials have not changed a great deal: closed form must be reconciled with action and idea, stylistic diversity and popular roots with coherence, questioning and search with entertainment and fun, reflection and intimacy….All these issues go back to Monteverdi and Mozart, but they have been restated most forcefully in our century by Kurt Weill and his collaborators, and they are again the top items on our music theatre agenda.69

Works such as *Street Scene* (1947) and Gian Carlo Menotti’s *The Telephone* and *The Medium*, Blitzstein’s *Regina* (1949) as well as Bernstein’s *Trouble in Tahiti* (1952) furthered an operatic art form on Broadway that stressed more dramatic values than vocal aesthetics.70 As a result, musical theater songs featured dramatic traits and intensity derived from operatic forms. Weill’s American musical theater songs are excellent

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68 Grant, 82.
70 Grant, 111.
examples of this hybrid style where music often supplies emotional content that text alone cannot imply.

During Weill’s lifetime, scholars criticized and debated the motivation behind his work. Because of the so-called radical split between Weill’s “German” style and his “American” style, classical-music critics considered him a sellout to the commercialism of Broadway. But Weill had a very different opinion, and wrote at length about what he considered his purpose. In essence, he wanted to inter-mingle popular forms of music with the “classical” form of opera, and out of that combination produce a new “American Opera” which would not only entertain the public, but provide artistic inspiration and rebirth to the musical scene in the United States. Well aware that his music crossed over into a hybrid style, Weill responded to an interviewer about the features of his Railroads on Parade (commissioned for the Word’s Fair, 1939), “I have never acknowledged the difference between ‘serious’ music and ‘light’ music—there is only good music and bad music.”

Admiration for Weill’s American music was explicit at the time of his death. In July 1950, ten thousand people attended a concert presented by the New York Philharmonic at Lewisohn Stadium as a tribute to Weill’s “lasting contribution to theatre music of our times.” None of Weill’s European works was performed, only songs from his American period. Just a few years after Weill’s death, the rediscovery of his German works coincided with the postwar interest in Brecht’s writing. With no one to disprove

71 Schebera, 271.
72 Kowalke, Theater, 78.
Brecht’s claim of responsibility for success in their work and with disregard to the brevity of their collaboration, various myths began in the presumed performance practice of Weill style.

Recently, we have seen a regeneration of Kurt Weill’s works prompted by events and productions for the centennial celebration of his birth in 2000. In February 2007, Weill’s opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* was performed in both Los Angeles and Boston. The L.A. production featured singers, Audra McDonald and Patti LuPone as the female leads; the Boston production, reportedly less flashy and jazzy, cast two classical artists, Amy Burton and Joyce Castle to entice opera goers. *The Threepenny Opera* boasted another successful Broadway run in the previous winter. At present the Manhattan Theatre Club is running a Hal Prince production called *LoveMusik*, a musical about Weill’s and Lenya’s non-traditional love life, with a score derived from his catalogue, including excerpts from the American repertoire.

**Weill Mythology**

In 1950 Weill was under the impression that all of his early works were lost in Germany during the war. Within a decade after his death, the early Weill works were rediscovered, beginning with the phenomenal off-Broadway success of Marc Blitzstein’s American adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* (1954), which cast Weill’s widow Lotte Lenya in one of the major roles. Lenya was a successful singer-actress in Germany but worked sparingly in America before Weill’s death. *The Threepenny Opera* was one of the longest running shows in American musical history and the show-stopping song
Mack the Knife sold more than ten million records. “One by one [Lenya] recorded Weill’s works in renditions that have now become legendary.”

With the “Weill renaissance” came interest only in his musical collaborations with Brecht. Weill became the “threepenny” composer and all but forgotten as a Broadway composer. What followed was a haphazard series of misconceptions and myths in regard to Weill’s musical style that actually eclipsed the range of his compositional catalog.

The largest myth perhaps is that Weill’s compositional methods are vastly different between the European and American works, that one style catered to commercialism or assumed obvious technical deficiencies. Another is the myth that Weill’s theater works come out of cabaret even though Weill never composed for the German cabaret theater. The confusion may stem from either the popularity of his theater songs recorded by cabaret singers, or Lenya’s performance in the 1966 musical Cabaret.

The myth that Weill conceived all of his works with Lenya’s voice in mind still persists. Of his twenty plus stage works, Lenya originated roles in only five; and only one was a principal role. Propelled by the success of The Threepenny Opera, a collection of Weill’s European songs were recorded by Lenya in a now famous interpretation. She was in her fifties and her voice was in a much lower register with the

75 McClung, 109.
raspy quality of a smoker. Definitive as they are, the recordings do not represent what Weill actually wrote. For example, the songs from *The Seven Deadly Sins* were transposed down a fourth and other works were newly arranged and re-orchestrated.

The vocal handicaps that characterize Lenya’s much older voice, the much lower narrow range and unappealing vibrato, for example, were perceived as supposed stylistic virtues of Weillian-Brecht style. The recordings became legendary but anachronistically viewed as authentic Weill style. “As a result, Weill’s scores written to Brecht’s texts have to this day only occasionally been performed in authentic versions by singers as skilled as those in the original casts.”

It has taken decades of explanation, some by Lenya herself, “to make the world realize that he’d actually intended much of his work to be sung by trained voices.” Lenya’s compelling style of delivery was her own artistry and considered authentic for many years, but imitators of Lenya’s sound incorrectly assumed that the limitations of her voice were implicit in Weill’s songs. The work of “imitators” resulted in more myth and misperceptions in Weill performances.

The tradition of the Brecht-Weill works was largely misconstrued with the “Brechtian-bark performance practice” that immediately downplayed the composer’s contributions and incorrectly “assumed that all of their works had been fashioned for singing actors.” Out of nine total collaborations with Brecht, only two productions were cast as such. Clarity and directness distinguishes the early authentic performances.

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78 McClung, 109.
recorded by original cast members. These performers used a vocal and dramatic
technique appropriate to Brecht’s call for textual clarity and non-emotional delivery, but
in keeping with Weill’s notated melodies.  

Originally, Brechtian was characteristically unsentimental, “cool,” aligned with
the no-frills directness of popular singers but none the less musically accurate, a distinct
style assigned to only two works specifically. But misguided perceptions often
extended the singing-acting principles to works not conceived for such an approach such
as Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny. “Every attempt to do it with actors has failed;
it has to be done with singers who can act.” Paired with Lenya’s recordings as
indisputable authority, the popularity of the “Brechtian bark” encouraged performers to
transpose songs to low speaking-voice ranges and to replace high notes with
Sprechstimme (speaking voice, approximate pitch production). It also led to the
rearrangement of musical scores in ways that eliminated important musical nuances.

Importantly, Lenya’s recordings remain authoritative for her artistry and skill in
interpreting Weill’s musical intentions, but not for her vocal sound. Her interpretations
were pure story-telling, natural and uncompromising in textual clarity, and while she
never learned to read music, she remained faithful to Weill’s written melodies. Weill’s
own writing is more insightful about Lenya:

81 Quoted in Ben Finane, “Regina Resnik pipes up for the art of Kurt Weill,” San Francisco
She is a miserable housewife, but a very good actress. She can’t read music, but when she sings, people listen as if it were Caruso. (For that matter, I pity any composer whose wife can read music.) She doesn’t meddle in my work (that is one of her foremost attributes).  

Lenya did not acquire the speech-derived syncopated style in popular stage singing of the 1930s and 1940s, although there is reason to suppose that she wished for it. In a letter to Weill dated June 26, 1944, Lenya described an experience in seeing *Follow the Girls* which starred Gertrude Niesen.

She [Niesen] is a mixture of everything: Merman, Fany Brice and mostly May West. Sings beautifully with a very deep voice and completely relaxed and like a fish in clear water. Maybe the “most” American girl on the stage. Wonderful sense of comedie. The music is not worth spending a drop of ink, there is one song she sings: “I Want to Get Married” which is kind of pattern song and which she does with really great stile and charm. So it was a very pleasant evening. You know, how excited I can get, when I see something good on the stage. But I saw also, how very, very different it is, when they sing songs. I don’t think I ever can learn that. Or somebody would have to teach me.

Lenya’s limitations fall short only in one specifically American idiom that Weill often subsumed into his songs, the jazzy fox-trot or swing style. Lenya could not *swing*. Evidence can be gleaned from the recording by Sony: Masterworks Heritage Vocal Series: *Lotte Lenya Sings Kurt Weill American Theater Songs*. The last selection on the disc reveals a recording session with Louis Armstrong trying to teach Lenya the syncopation necessary for the style.

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83 Weill, quoted in *Speak Low (When You Speak Love)*, 3.
84 Lotte Lenya, quoted in *Speak Low (When You Speak Love)*, 371.
VI. INFLUENCES ON SINGING STYLES IN AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATER

Before the 1920s, the lines between opera, operetta, and musical comedy singing were not as distinct as they are today. Metropolitan Opera divas were celebrated as popular music stars. From the 1930s through the 1950s well-known opera singers “crossed over” to Broadway, even made appearances in Hollywood movies. Lehman Engel, conductor and musical theater authority clarified:

Up to about 1920, a singer was a singer. That is, he was someone with a highly polished and sizable voice that gave evidence of having been “trained.” The leading singers were often borrowed from the Metropolitan Opera. In Victor Herbert’s Mlle. Modiste there was Fritzi Scheff, who became a bigger star on Broadway singing “Kiss Me Again” than she had been at the Met as Musetta in La Boheme. Later, Herbert used Emma Trentini (coloratura) of the Manhattan Opera House and Orville Harrold (the Met’s Parsifal) in Naughty Marietta. In a sense, the vocal requirements of Broadway were at the time nearly synonymous with those of opera.  

However, as American musical theater evolved since the 1920s, it gradually demanded a new kind of voice and a new kind of melodic writing different from light opera, even from the influential Gilbert and Sullivan variety. Songs became more tightly woven into the storyline and the plot became more integral to musical theater. The librettos, lyrics and acting skills became much more essential. The changes in musical theater were a result of the developments in American culture. Since the culture

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86 Grant, 12.
became influenced widely by more popular forms of entertainment, musicals adjusted to the tastes of the average citizen and their interests such as radio, jazz and the latest dance craze. Changes ultimately meant that the operatic singing style on Broadway would be transformed into a distinctly different style, a more natural speech-based singing style.

Lowering the Vocal Range and Tessitura

In the 1920s, classically-trained singers were performing songs by Broadway composers such as Victor Herbert, Sigmund Romberg, and Rudolph Friml, who wrote soaring operatic-style melodies influenced by European classical music. Their melodies were more lyrical and had a wider melodic range than songs performed in vaudeville. But the classical-style melodies were becoming less desirable since they could not support the lyrics in a natural manner of speech.

The lowering of the vocal range (the interval between the highest pitch and the lowest) in much of the songwriting became one of the first changes made to pave the way for a more speech-based melody. In musicals before 1930 the tessitura (where most notes of the melody lie in a song) was conventionally higher for both male and female voices. But singing in the higher ranges made consonants and words less clear and required singers to modify vowel sounds in order to enhance tonal beauty. But for crystal clear delivery of text, however, it became necessary not only to compose in lower keys, but also to lower the tessitura.

Interestingly, when intelligibility of the lyrics became a more valued aesthetic, the romantic lead roles were given more often to the lower-voiced performers, mezzos and
baritones, rather than higher voices, sopranos and tenors, who tended to play the comedic roles. The early tradition of romantic leads sung by high voices was a carryover from opera and operetta.

The Riff Songs

The operetta melodies of the early 1900s were through-composed. Because the melodic material did not repeat often and was frequently varied, the complicated tune was not very easy to remember upon a first hearing. The riff song, however, was a simple “catchy” tune built on short repeated diatonic (white-key) patterns. It was easy to remember and easy for the average person to learn, a perfect subliminal marketing tool and one that enabled the audience to participate in sing-a-longs. After all, “singing” was one of America’s favorite pastimes. Now, everyone could be a singer and in a comfortable range.

Irving Berlin’s (1888-1989) *Alexander’s Ragtime Band* is a classic example of the riff song: the initial four-note motive is repeated twice, then three times again at a higher pitch. George M. Cohan’s (1878-1942) famous World War I anthem *Over There* is another example with its bugle call riff stated five times before any other pitches are sung. Vincent Youman’s signature song, *Tea for Two*, is built on a four-note riff. Rodgers’ *I Wish I Were in Love Again* from *Babes in Arms* (1937) opens with six

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87 Grant, 29.
88 Ibid.
statements of a riff harmonized by only two alternative chords. The riff song could be described as under-composed compared to the soaring operatic musical songs.

Both Berlin and Cohan were masters of the riff song as well as the ballad style. Berlin even composed a riffed ballad much later for the song *You’re Just in Love* from *Call Me Madam* (1950) and a riffed waltz for *Always*.\(^8^9\) Riff tunes were popular and created a desired “hook,” but lacked the desired dramatic emotional intensity of other songs. Incidentally, the swing bands thrived on riff songs into the 1950s; Glenn Miller’s *In the Mood* is a classic example.\(^9^0\) There are some fine examples of interpretation for the two songs mentioned previously (*Always* and *You’re Just in Love*) recorded by Connie Boswell and Rosemary Clooney, respectively.

**Jerome Kern**

It was Jerome Kern (1885-1945) who first combined successfully riff patterns and operetta-like melodies so that singers could more easily project their sound, communicate the lyrics, and express a vivid sense of the character.\(^9^1\) Melodies were constructed by periodic phrases which followed the sentence structure of the lyrics.

The periodic form was generally four groups of eight-measure phrases identified by sections—AABA—with B as the bridge or release section. The bridge was typically a short contrasting passage of music to create a pivotal point in the song. By altering the

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\(^8^9\) Grant, 29.
\(^9^0\) Grant, 30.
\(^9^1\) Grant, 31. *Showboat* (1927) is considered the first most effective combination of popular and classical styles in American stage music in collaboration with Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II.
melodic material rather than repeating it, a sense of drama was built within the symmetrical measures. Kern’s melodies build continually to a culmination and peak in vocal range. For example, the song “Bill” is a talk-singing style melody of stepwise movement that builds gradually until the dramatic leaps in the final measures. Unlike Victor Herbert’s melodies, Kern’s songs never taxed the singer to the point of slurring consonants and modifying vowel sounds into unintelligibility at the expense of the text.92

The first consistent use of instrumental overtures, actually medleys, for musical theater productions and the orchestrated song reprise was introduced by Kern to market the songs and “plug” the potential hit tunes.93 This concept preempted the marketing of musical theater songs in the 1940s and 50s through popular cover recordings by big bands and their “headline” singers.

Merging Vocal Styles

While the operatic singing voice prevailed in musical theater before 1920, two different influences emerged known as ballad singing. One was the Irish-American ballad style called talk-singing or more often patter singing.94 Another was the African-American style of singing influenced by black jazz musicians. These singing styles were performed in minstrel shows and later in vaudeville (variety shows), the precursor to musical theater, and emphasized textual intelligibility rather than tonal beauty.

92 Grant, 31.
93 Grant, 32.
94 Grant, 17.
The patter singer’s technique was vernacular “recitative” (an operatic term for talk-singing) and would routinely lead the audience in a sing-along as part of a stage show. A perfect example can be observed in the black and white film *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) which stars James Cagney as the composer-performer George M. Cohan, performing famous numbers such as *Harrigan* and *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling*.

The black ballad singer’s technique was to bend or manipulate melody for a more communicative style that flows more naturally and more eloquently from language. It was an oratorical approach to songs, closer to dramatic speech in order to express the lyrics with more sentiment and passion. The style was characteristic of “rubato” (stealing time, shortening or lengthening note values) in the melody to allow more emphatic enunciation of words and nuances. The shaping of words was also characteristic, “milking the words” by slurring, gliding or slight ornamentation to express the meanings and the emotions of the music. Black performers of the minstrel shows often ornamented their melodies by imitating instruments of the pit bands. The black musician’s use of language and their heritage of the blues, ragtime and jazz influenced later composers of musical theater and American popular music.

The minstrel shows originally featured white men with blackened faces (with make-up) imitating black men imitating white men but not quite pulling it off, naturally.

The degree by which they didn’t quite make it was felt at the time to be charming and amusing. The fact that black men themselves could find a place in the

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95 Pleasants, “Bel Canto in Jazz and Pop Singing,” 55.
American theater only through the minstrel show compounded this nonsense: Since they were not black enough, they blacked their own faces to put on shows in which they imitated white men imitating black men imitating white men.\(^{97}\)

This was carried over into vaudeville where there was an intermingling of the African-American style with the Irish-American style, most vividly represented by the enormously popular singers Sophie Tucker (1884-1966) and Al Jolson (1886-1950). Incidentally, there was also a parallel black vaudeville circuit produced by the Theater Owners’ Booking Association (TOBA), referred to as “Tough on Black Artists” at the time by the black performers.\(^{98}\)

By 1935 the influence of swing, commercialized jazz, permeated the American culture. Concurrently, the amalgamation of patter singing and black ballad singing style influenced changes in the melodic writing of Broadway by composers Kern, Berlin, Gershwin, Porter, and the Rodgers and Hart team. Newer up-beat songs slowly “drove legitimate singing from its near monopoly into being merely a competing style.”\(^{99}\)

However, many singers successfully negotiated a transition. As Lehman Engel described, “Anyone who sang I Want to Be Happy or I Get a Kick Out of You or I’m Bidin’ My Time like Musetta’s Waltz from La Boheme was definitely way-out wrong.”\(^{100}\)

The style Jolson created was a blend which is a little closer to legitimate singing than talk-singing. “And this raises the question of vocal technique,” Engel added:

\(^{97}\) Pleasants, “Bel Canto in Jazz and Pop Singing,” 56.
\(^{98}\) Pleasants, 56.
\(^{99}\) Grant, 35.
\(^{100}\) Engel, quoted in Grant, 36.
If Mary Martin, Ethel Merman, and Alfred Drake, had not known how to use their voices, they would have lost them long ago. What they had to do was “place” their voices differently—in a lower, “belting” register—and (to put it as simply as possible) to make them fat and loud without making them round. They sang more on words than on pure vocal lines.¹⁰¹

From this style emerged the belt or belt mixed voice, legitimized by if not uniquely manufactured by none other than, Ethel (Zimmermann) Merman (1908-1984). Before the 1920s and Merman, Sophie Tucker and other performers only used the belt style in roles that stereotyped black women. When singing torch songs (the “white” counterpart to the blues) before the 1930s, performers did not use the belt voice but a light legitimate-styled voice. Fanny Brice who sang “My Man” in the Ziegfeld Follies (1921) had a light alto voice similar in range to Marlene Dietrich or the young Lotte Lenya. Helen Morgan, the original Julie in Show Boat sang “Bill” and torch songs in her light lyric soprano voice. Before 1930, the belt-style voice was used only by black performers or white performers in blackface imitating black singers.¹⁰²

Merman’s voice was unusual in that the chest voice was not husky but bright and brassy. The voice was unique among theater performers. Her singing sounded similar to speech but was carried through the breath by well-shaped and clear tones, “especially early in her career when the vibrato had not yet veered out of control.”¹⁰³ She was able to belt out the lyric without modifying her vowels or her consonants. As Grant described her early recordings:

¹⁰¹ Engel, quoted in Grant, 36.
¹⁰² Grant, 38.
¹⁰³ Grant, 36.
When she chose to, she could sing on the lyric and interpret it in Sinatra-like style, as one can clearly hear in her 1934 recording of “I Get a Kick Out of You.” She could sing softly and yet project without the microphone. She could whisper like Crosby but ultimately got typecast for belting. She also has an unacknowledged debt to Jolson, freely using Jolson-style grace notes and appoggiaturas as late as “You’ll Never Get Away from Me” in Gypsy (1959).104

Her voice was a model instrument of intelligibility with the ability to project the dramatic values of the lyric. Her success paved the way for many non-classical voices like Mary Martin and Nanette Fabray. Lamentably, Merman’s example in the use of belting later became more of a “raucous exploitation of its vocal timbre,” used to artificially “pump up excitement” in the way amplification might be used, instead of serving as a means to enhance the lyric and the character.105

From this belt mixed vocal style the singing-actor emerged and validated, for the first time, a manner of singing that distinguished musical theater style from opera. The musical theater standard emphasized language, intelligibility of the words and their meaning. Now, other popular stage singers heard on Broadway such as Deanna Durbin, Nelson Eddy, Mario Lanza, Jeanette MacDonald and Lawrence Tibbett were “classified” distinctly as European-style singers, operetta singers who sang in an operatic manner.106 The criteria for the Broadway singing-actor became not so much “what” the performer sang but “the way” he or she sang it.

104 Grant, 38.
105 Grant, 39.
The Lyrics

Early in the evolution of Broadway song styles, the music was often superior to the lyric. Before the 1930s, most lyrics “were not only cliché-ridden, but also stodgy, awkward, pretentious, stentorian, and grandiloquent,” everything but relatable and universal.\textsuperscript{107} In contrast later, intelligibility and artful communication became a primary function of song lyrics. In addition, the lyrics were prescribed a more universal context by such writers as Berlin, Porter, Lorenz Hart, Ira Gershwin, Yip Harburg, Oscar Hammerstein II, Howard Dietz, Dorothy Fields, Frank Loesser, Alan Jay Lerner, and others.

These lyricists were influenced largely by witty conversational poems rooted in the “society verse” of nineteenth century poets such as Lewis Carroll and the style of contemporary writers A. E. Houseman and Dorothy Parker. With intelligibility an important objective, word-imagery and alliteration became prominent features of the narrative patter-style ballad in vaudeville and early Broadway musicals.\textsuperscript{108} With a more consistent point of view, both songs and lyrics were constructed as elements of cohesion and sequence in the drama. As the lyrics and music became interactive and more thoroughly integrated within the musical work, lyrics became characteristic of a more sincere quality.

As musical theater songs developed in the golden era (1927 to roughly 1960) the lyrics began to address universals in the human condition beyond the obvious immediate

\textsuperscript{107} Engel, quoted in Grant, 83.
\textsuperscript{108} Grant, 83.
dramatic situation on stage. *Ol’ Man River* not only sets the scene in *Show Boat*, but also “portrays the force of timelessness in human events.” Maxwell Anderson’s *September Song* from *Knickerbocker Holiday* addresses not only a pivotal moment for the character but also the emotions most men face in the twilight time of life. Although Hammerstein’s *I Whistle a Happy Tune* from *The King and I* was written for a specific dramatic moment in the musical, it also expresses the universal truth that most humans can find lighthearted ways psychologically to alleviate their fears. Hart’s *Where or When* and *Bewitched*, Porter’s *In the Still of the Night* and *So in Love*, Ira Gershwin’s *Embraceable You* and *My Ship*, Berlin’s *Always*, Dorothy Field’s *The Way You Look Tonight*, Yip Harburg’s *Over the Rainbow*, and Langston Hughes’s *Lonely House* are all examples of the universal objective in song lyrics for the stage.

The wit and elegance of the language typical in later song lyrics provided a sophistication and naturalness for the more direct communicative singing style. Characteristic of the lyric is the mimicking of its natural rhythm in the melody. Use of alliteration and nuance from the sounds of the consonants is typical. Text-painting is sometimes used in relation to the melody, as is the use of hyperbole or overstatement (a “hook”) to capture the listener’s attention. Another characteristic is the careful placement of vowel sounds in melodic phrases, so that a singer has something substantial to sing on. “Thus the experienced lyric writer will produce a string of words that have an

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109 Grant, 87.
uncomplicated semantic import, that are musical in the sense that they have pleasing and
memorable sounds, and that are singable.”

Typically, lyrics are set by very simple melodic treatment, one note per syllable,
so the singer can communicate words and nuance as naturally as possible (as in speech)
through the song. This simple musical treatment allows for ironic shading or deeper
inferences of the text to be characterized in the musical accompaniment. Vocal melisma
(a syllable set to several sung notes) is seldom if ever required for the style as it would
contradict the natural speech-derived approach.

The Foxtrot and Rhythm Section

When social dancing in America’s public ballrooms grew to a widespread form of
entertainment in the early 1900s, the popularity of the foxtrot rhythm spread quickly and
created a revolutionary change in the instrumentation of both dance bands and the theater
pit orchestras. Changes included reducing the number of string players and adding a
specialized rhythm section, “which once universally adopted, transformed theater music
as well as all popular music.” Initially the foxtrot was a four-beat quick step and by
the late 1910s the term “foxtrot” generally appeared on any jazz or dance band
arrangement of almost any song.

The foxtrot is in four beats with the accents on the first and third beat. But the
oom-pah of the march and the oom-pah-pah of the waltz are gone. The four beats


\[111\] Grant, 141.
of a foxtrot-based song typically correspond to the step-pause step-pause (slow, slow) rhythm of the feet. The foxtrot thus does not have heavy-footed beats: it has a cushioned, nonstomping downbeat and nontapping afterbeats.\textsuperscript{112}

Surprisingly, changes took place first in the theater rather than in the ballroom. The drums became more important and string sections were replaced by Dixieland jazz instrumentation to propel the sense of downbeat and emphasize the dance rhythms.\textsuperscript{113} The instrumentation typically included brass (trumpets and trombones), reeds (saxophones doubling on clarinets) and rhythm section with strings added occasionally as needed. The rhythm section was a separate ensemble of piano, drums, string bass and guitar. The primary function of the rhythm section, whether for dance, jazz, or theater pit band was to maintain the steady beat, a function that did not exist previously on Broadway or in traditional opera.\textsuperscript{114} Generally, the bass, guitar and the piano outlined the chords, as a vernacular basso continuo, and emphasized the first and third beats while others played the backbeats.

By 1940 the rhythm section was standard infrastructure of the orchestra and any song that advanced the plot or characters’ role in a musical, whether up-tempo or slow ballads, were usually written in a foxtrot rhythm, or swing rhythm. Less significant songs were set typically to other rhythms, such as the waltz. It was Jerome Kern who first contributed to the innovation with a slow ballad though written still in cut time (2/2). \textit{They Didn’t Believe Me} from the musical \textit{The Girl from Utah} (1914) became the first hit

\textsuperscript{112} Grant, 136-137.
\textsuperscript{113} Grant, 144.
\textsuperscript{114} Grant, 144-145.
song written in a slow foxtrot rhythm. Despite the cut time, which usually indicated a brisk pace, the chorus section of the song slowed to a walking gait, “half as fast as you would play the one-step” or a ragtime piece. This shifted the narrative elements of a song from the verse (as in the earlier marches or waltz songs) to the chorus (or refrain) which was the more memorable catchy part of the tune.

The smooth steady gait of the rhythm section became indispensable to the singing style. It allowed the singer more liberty to communicate the words, to free up the textual sophistication of the lyrics. The requirement for accompaniment was to be steady though not rigid in style in order to support musical theater’s more speech-derived approach to melodic line.

The use of the foxtrot in vocal music dominated not just Broadway but the entire popular music business for decades. The foxtrot rhythm was the sound in all famous dance bands leading into the 1950s. Other popular dance rhythms such as the waltz, Latin beats, and the Charleston also were used, typically for songs written outside the plot-line (but many were actually a metric modulation of the foxtrot, like the beguine).

The Microphone, Radio and Popular Singers

Of equal impact in the evolution of singing was the advent of the microphone and radio, which produced a great many celebrated artists. These influences ultimately cultivated the most unique change in vocal style as radio broadcasts and recordings began

115 Grant, 138.
to penetrate the American airwaves in the 1920s. Radio’s popularity only enhanced the
creative use of word-imagery and timing in the great oral tradition of American popular
culture. At this point, a consensus of what constituted fine singing slowly but inexorably
changed to include the attributes of celebrated, often untrained voices of the great popular
singers.\footnote{116}

Popular singers’ vocal production flows naturally, “almost imperceptibly,” from
speech, since everyday speech is normally pitched lower than in song. “The popular
singer accepted song as a lyrical extension of speech and was even more concerned than
was the classical singer with text, both its meaning and with the melodic and rhythmical
manner in which it might be spoken.”\footnote{117}

One of the finest and most influential of vocal artists and theater singer-actors of
the era was Ethel Waters (1896-1977). She recorded the blues early in her career and
later more traditional popular songs. Performing well into her seventies, she sang in the
crusades traveling with the esteemed Rev. Billy Graham for many years. Highly
successful, she was the first black artist in what was referred to as “white time” by the
black musicians of her generation.\footnote{118} Waters influenced white singers such as Mildred
Bailey, Connie Boswell, and even Sophie Tucker who were much admired in the 1920s
and 30s. Waters performed in several early Broadway shows including \textit{Africana} (1927),
\textit{Blackbirds of 1930}, and \textit{Rhapsody in Black} (1931), but it was Harold Arlene’s

\footnote{116} Pleasants, \textit{The Great American Popular Singers}, 29.\footnote{117} Pleasants, 35.\footnote{118} Pleasants, “Bel Canto in Jazz and Pop Singing,” 56.
Stormy Weather that boosted her to stardom. Besides parts in notable Hollywood films, the major hits of Broadway in which she was featured included As Thousands Cheer (1933), At Home Abroad (1935), and Cabin in the Sky (1940), a role she later performed in the film version, and Member of the Wedding (1950).

Waters’ recordings are particularly instructive in enunciation and the way she sings on consonants, the n’s, m’s, and l’s especially. She can milk every important word with the most naturally clever shading and nuance, and can transmit charm, character, warmth, and her radiant smile. In his book My Singing Teachers Mel Tormé insightfully reflected on Waters’ influence and “reading” of a lyric, with an added quote by Mahalia Jackson: “They all come from Ethel: Sarah and Ella and Billie.”

When the recording industry of the 1920’s was still primitive and unresponsive to certain soft toned instruments and vocal subtleties, the radio microphone was extremely sensitive to the voice and nuance. The widespread use of the microphone coincided with the influence of jazz music. Jazz and the microphone made possible a singing style of unprecedented intimacy.

The microphone liberated [the singer] from the burden of making himself heard over considerable distances in public places. Jazz liberated him from the precise pitches and more or less arithmetically calculated rhythms of European music, permitting him to order the words within a phrase in a manner closer to the natural melody and the natural rhythm of speech.

120 Pleasants, 25.
121 Pleasants, 26.
The first popular singer to fully understand the possible attributes of the microphone more than any other performer was Harry Lillis “Bing” Crosby (1903-1977). He discovered that “a singer could no longer get any payoff from high notes….The singer was required to phrase and to look for effects from his phrasing rather than from his big voice.”

Crooning, it was called then. With the microphone, the untrained voice could project vocal expression and nuance far as the amplification allowed. The resulting sound was “alive” but not “live” in the way Jolson projected live sound. Singers like Crosby and Frank Sinatra projected an:

Intimate vocal communication, a feeling for rhythm, phrase and line rarely matched by classical singers, and a smooth, often lovely, almost always pleasing vocal tone, unblemished by forcing or by conspicuous differences in character and color between one register and another, not to speak of what is accomplished in the handling of text!

After the microphone and amplification became standard on Broadway, operatic singers continued to appear successfully but were rarely the requisite performer. Their operatic training no longer made them indispensable as a singer in musical theater. However, some classically trained performers were heralded for their combination of great singing and acting ability. For example, John Raitt was celebrated as a singer for “everyman” because of his tenor-baritone range and stunning approach to songs, while Alfred Drake was praised for his commanding stage presence and warmth.

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124 Tormé, 172.
tessitura voices were still sought after and admired. Well-known singers such as Marion Bell (wife of the lyricist, Allan Jay Lerner) performed the lead in *Brigadoon* (1947) and Jo Sullivan and Barbara Cook performed through the 1950s.\(^\text{125}\) The unique mix of singing techniques, highly regarded singers, and technical innovation contributed to a “golden era” of American musical theater that began with *Showboat* in 1927 and lasted well over thirty years.

**Artistic Alliances**

The golden era (1927 to about 1960) of American musical theater produced celebrated singing actors including Ethel Merman, Ethel Waters, Vivienne Segal, Mary Martin, Todd Duncan, John Raitt, Angela Lansbury, Alfred Drake, Nanette Fabray, Barbara Cook, Julie Andrews, Celeste Holm, Robert Preston, Richard Kiley, Jack Cassidy, Judy Holliday and others. These performers were able to balance personal charisma with a combination of values in musicianship, acting, vocal technique and communicating the lyric with a high regard for their character role.\(^\text{126}\)

Coincidentally, the era of great popular jazz and swing vocalists occurred at the same time. The popular jazz stylists included Bing Crosby, Ethel Waters, Frank Sinatra, Mildred Bailey, Connie Boswell, Judy Garland, Ella Fitzgerald, Rosemary Clooney, Peggy Lee, Mel Torme, Sarah Vaughan, Carmen MacRae, Tony Bennett and many others. These performers were great interpreters of the lyrics. Many also were good

\(^{125}\) Grant, 43.
\(^{126}\) Ibid.
actors. The foremost singers mastered a communicative, natural approach to words and music. There were often more or less subtle alterations and embellishments in rhythm and vocal lines, but the swing vocalists generally preserved the integrity of the melody as written.

An alliance of sorts formed during this era between Broadway and popular recording artists which fully encouraged jazz and dance band arrangements of theater songs in the popular music market. From the mid 1930s through the 1950s, the big bands and their vocalists led by Benny Goodman, the Dorsey’s, Glen Miller, Artie Shaw, Harry James, Chick Webb, and others helped to popularize Broadway theater songs through radio broadcasts and record purchases. For example, songs from Porter’s *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948) were recorded by Dinah Washington, Frank Sinatra, Mabel Mercer, Ella Fitzgerald, Julie London, Mel Torme, and Peggy Lee.”

Many theater songs became popular dance standards through the big band arrangements that topped the *Billboard* charts and the *Hit Parade* and ensured national distribution of the show tunes. Even original cast recordings from shows were often listed on the national *Top Ten* charts throughout the 1950s. The commercial success of the Broadway alliance extended into the early 1960s with Bobby Darin’s vocal styling of *Mack the Knife* and Louis Armstrong’s hit with *Hello, Dolly!*; recorded at the same time the Beatles were rising in popularity.”

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127 Grant, 43.
128 Grant, 44.
musical theater performers shared equally the prestige and artistic merits associated with hit songs.

The evolution of singing in American musical theater gradually demanded a new kind of voice and a new kind of songwriting that was impacted by jazz and swing. The results were twofold: melodic writing that enabled the voice to clearly communicate the lyric, and a new style of intelligible singing that delivered both tune and text more communicatively and naturally.

What made many of the golden era Broadway songs memorable and enduring was a cultivation of the popular trends which developed in America. As audiences responded to blues and jazz with widespread enthusiasm, they became more receptive to the oratorical approach to singing. As the librettos and the dramatic integration developed on Broadway, the lyrics became more eloquent, sincere and universal. Consequently, the older and elaborate operatic singing style had to relinquish its position as the most popular style to the more eloquent, speech-derived singing style.
VII. WEILL’S METHODOLOGY FOR AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATER SONGS

A General Perspective for Songs

From the perspective of songs, Weill was unique in what he brought to Broadway. His earliest ballads, as conductor Maurice Abravanel observed, were different from anything that had been heard on Broadway at the time and “so no matter how much Weill tried to adapt you can still recognize his own palette.”\(^{129}\) The overall Weill palette during the time of *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938) was described further as a “severe quality, a mordant deliberateness, an insistently pulsating meter, and a melodic economy” characteristic of Weill’s music in the Brecht years. The songs, however, *September Song* and *It Never Was You*, possessed a delicate gentleness and “an airy spaciousness” that was considered new to Weill.\(^{130}\)

Most songs are tailored to 1940s Broadway conventions of the ballad which were characteristically “universal” in the context of the lyric. The standard form or construction of ballads is known by the “call” letters and number of measures typically contained therein such as AABA 32-bar refrain or extensions thereof (commonly shortened to AABA or ABAB form).

Referring to its sectional design and most often presented in 32 bars of a chorus/refrain section of music, section (A) is repeated once, followed by a transitional section of music called the bridge (B), with a final repeat or restatement of section (A).

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\(^{129}\) Abravanel, quoted in Hirsch, 175.

\(^{130}\) Hirsch, 175.
A few songs are strophic in form (where music is repeated under each additional verse of text) and those that are designed strophic feature lyrics that are more comic, sometimes scene-specific, and less “universal” in substance. Weill’s use of strophic songs was more prevalent in the early European stage works.

Weill’s Musical Language

His harmonic language incorporates many of the standard chords of traditional tonal music as well as popular Swing era harmonies such as the 4-note chords and blue note chords which result from the voice leading in the melody (typical were the added sixth, dominant sevenths, ninths, and elevenths; and blue notes: flat 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th). The use of non-tonic entrances is typical in Weill’s songs. Traces of the earlier Weill’s extended tonalities or double-tonic tonalities are evident (such as the intermingling of major chords with their relative-minor chord and fifth-generated chords).

Weill’s use of melody is economical in that he sets the text sparingly, using only notated values that align closely with the natural rhythm of the words, a more natural and believable expression of text. Between phrases of the lyrics Weill often inserts solo instrumental lines and countermelodies. These are important constructive features that he uses to tie together the subtext or inferences of the lyrics with the unmistakable mood of the music.

Rhythmically, songs often require a steady underlying pulse in the bass line. Songs composed in variations of 32-bar form required the rhythm section to smoothly accentuate every beat in 4/4 time, which is crucial to the style to allow liberties by the
singer to make the expressive points and nuances without “bogging down” or muddying the words.

Style Objectives and Challenges

Weill’s American songs are anything but derisive or brash or German cabaret-ish. Characteristically, his American songs share the traits of traditional musical theater and popular swing era vocal styling. A melodic economy remains that is reminiscent of Weill’s early European songs. But the American songs feature a precision in setting words to music, which allows for languid, nonchalant expression and a textual pliancy in the voice.

As diverse as the songs are individually, together they comprise a synthesis of operatic lyricism and popular song features. Singers of this repertoire must have a well-grounded vocal technique, the ability to articulate words in a natural, crystal-clear way and a casual rhythmic lilt. It is an interesting challenge of balance. But it is nonetheless the definitive objective for musical theater singing and as a matter of fact, represents criteria central to classical art song repertoire as well.

Weill is fundamentally more challenging to interpret than his popular contemporaries because his songs were composed methodically in an integrated manner within each larger dramatic work. And because each work represents the literary style and tone of a different lyricist, there is a diverse quality in the lyrics themselves. It is important to note here again that few other composers or songwriters worked with so many different lyricists.
Because Weill orchestrated most of his songs, a piano-vocal reduction often falls short of representing the original musical nuances that are captured in the orchestration. These can be effectively experienced only from hearing an orchestral performance or recordings. Performers can use the piano-vocal scores, however, to understand the overall design of the songs, their basic melodic, harmonic and rhythmic features, and the manner in which Weill approaches the texts.

Many of the songs are only accessible from sheet music compilations. This is an area of concern in performance or audition preparations for just about any Broadway musical repertoire where numerous vocal anthologies are basically reproductions of the sheet music. Sheet music and piano-vocal scores for American musical theater works were not written as compositions for voice and piano. Often the right-hand piano part doubles the voice throughout. Consequently, it is crucial for singers and accompanists to regard the anthologies and sheet music as a blueprint only and devote time and attention to working out stylizations or “filler” music in the accompaniment (especially between sung phrases and under sustained tones) that will remain true to the original substance and rhythmic gesture (style characteristic) of a song. Also important to remember is that sheet music of individual songs is often transposed to lower keys that do not correspond with those of an original dramatic role. For that reason, performers should consult the vocal scores of a dramatic work rather than sheet music.

Moreover, as many musical theater works are representative of various aspects of change in performances (some “on the spot”) or performers, changing the key of songs to support a more comfortable vocal range may be appropriate and applicable in many
cases. It is important to note that the main feature that distinguishes the ballad style songs from those more operatic in form is the persistence of the syncopated melodic phrase, a calculated avoidance of metrically “square” rhythms and accented downbeats especially, so that particular nuances of the lyric can be highlighted. This aspect of style is inseparable from the rhythmic setting of the text. It is a stylistic feature not reflected in the notated music but is none-the-less central to the musical theater idiom that must be reflected in rendering an authentic representation for almost any song from the period.

Stylistic Traits

The lyrical and rhythmic features that define Weill’s style are 2-fold: a speech-derived emphasis and an operatic lyricism. The speech-derived emphasis involves stresses of semantic nuance and alliteration, as well as the pliancy that is built into the melodic line. Specifically, it involves inflection, emphatic consonants, and nuance of key words. The features of a more natural speech-derived emphasis include the use of rubato (stealing time within a melodic phrase and over-use of the triplet figure) and vocal ornamental devices such as appoggiatura (to lean), portamento (to carry, a long glide from one note to the next), turn (usually a 4-note embellishment) or glide (smooth slide or slur) which are often notated in Weill’s music but customarily “understood” in the vocal line, a carryover from the speech-derived influence of jazz/swing vocalism).

Operatic lyricism requires not only a very forward connection of the breath, but also dramatic intensity and the ability to sing in a higher tessitura. Dramatic intensity
and higher tessituras usually occur at the bridge sections and endings of songs. By unidiomatically extending vocal range in the songs, Weill provides an effective balance between more dramatic passages and the more economical melodies.

Harmonic features include shifts or vacillations from major to minor and unresolved cadence areas that convey often a surreal effect, or the deeper and changing emotions within a song. Also textural considerations such as counter melodies in the accompaniment contribute vitally to the spirit and emotional substance and should be highlighted and brought out in the accompaniment. At times, these inner melodies have intra-textural connections within the larger dramatic work.

For example, in My Ship from Lady in the Dark (1941), the initial melody is foreshadowed and gradually pieced together in the memory of the leading character from the beginning of the show. Lonely House from Street Scene (1947) features a dark and driving chromatic bass line with flashes of bluesy harmony that portends music used later to underscore the fateful murder of another character in the show.
VIII. A PARAMETRIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED SONGS

Speech-derived Emphasis

The following musical examples illustrate several features that contribute to Weill’s treatment of texts in keeping with the primary emphasis of speech-derived nuance, and how the music supports the spirit and essence of the words. The first six examples will provide a focus on the textual semantics and alliteration, and how Weill aligns the melody with accompaniment in the popular ballad style. The contour of melodies will always reflect the essence of text with a focus on inflection, emphatic consonants, and nuance. The “gist” of individual rhythmic styles can be observed from the bass line notation along with tempo markings.

Figure 1, *September Song* (Maxwell Anderson, *Knickerbocker Holiday*1938)
Weill’s first American hit composed for Walter Huston

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Refrain (with expression)} & \\
\text{But it’s a long, long while From May to December,} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

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In *September Song* (see Figure 1, above), Weill creates the effect of mood changes in the shifts between C major and C minor chords which is the song’s charm. His awareness of the emphatic consonants of key words is evident in the accompaniment setting so as to not inhibit the natural stresses and impact of words. Anticipating and elongating the *l*s of “long, long while” and vocalizing the *m*s in “from May to December” enhances the dramatic veracity of the lyrics to express the anxiety and hopelessness implied in the text. The triplet quarter-note figure rhythmically supplies the emphasis, pace, metaphor for the lingering of time from “May to December.” Notice in the 3rd measure (Figure 1, above) the change of melody and therefore a change of emotion implied with the flatted 3rd and 6th (E-flat / A-flat). The rhythm of the bass line using dotted eighth to sixteenth to quarter-note provides a steady plodding movement with the dotted eighths reinforcing the laid-back stresses in the melody.

Figure 2, *It Never Was You* (*Knickerbocker Holiday* 1938), for Male voice

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In Figure 2 above, *It Never Was You* also shows sensitivity to the key words and alliteration in the text. The consonant *n* of “never” and “anywhere” and the *y* of “you” are set by quarter-note triplets allowing the first syllable to be elongated rhythmically, built-in appoggiatura notated in the melody. The singer can lean on and sing through the *n*’s and the *y*. The emphasis contributes to the more heightened meaning of longing. Notice the reiteration of the triplet movement under “you” in the first full measure (Figure 2), that helps set the bluesy tone of the refrain in the inner voicing by slipping down to D-flat, hence the progression to B-flat minor in the next measure.

The following 2 examples are both from *Lady in the Dark* (1941). *This is New* (see Figure 3 below) shows a light texture in accompaniment with the down beat played only as single bass note under the vocal melody. This feature is prevalent and allows the singer more flexibility in timing and pliancy of consonants at the beginning of each measure with chord changes occurring on the weaker beats for interest and flow.

Figure 3, Randy’s song, *This is New* (Ira Gershwin, *Lady in the Dark* 1941)
The singer can sing on the languid consonants of \( n \) and \( m \) (and the \( x \) sound of “existing” can be stretched out into the following bar on the half-note). Notice the chord symbols referencing the C minor chords above the score (Figure 3). Typical of sheet music, these chords are misleading and in this case, incorrect because the actual chord tones reveal a duality that Weill maintains with C minor chords over A-flat.

Figure 4 below shows the first few measures of *My Ship*, a gentle “soft-shoe” rhythmic feel that is the most straightforward and poignant in the repertoire. The accompaniment is minimal and sparse when set under the key words in the text such as the words *ship, sails, silk, decks, trimmed, gold*. The alliteration in the text helps create the shimmer and glistening associated with the “ship,” but the decisive lack of accompaniment texture under those words allows the singer the necessary pliancy to articulate the most descriptive words in a manner that is deliberately casual (laid-back, offhanded). This sense of *rubato* is the stylistic element that helps “tell the story” through melody with the natural give-and-take rhythm of everyday speech (See Figure 4).

Figure 4, Liza’s song, *My Ship* (*Lady in the Dark*)
Consider also, if Weill had set the first word “My” on the downbeat rather than the anacrusis which can also be stressed melodically, it would off-set the important descriptive words and lack an effective languid essence.

Figure 5a, *The Romance of a Lifetime* (Sam Coslow, film *You and Me* 1938)

*The Romance of a Lifetime* in Figure 5a, is another example of that airy, elusive, speculative quality in harmonies. It begins *molto tranquillo* with the interrogative “Would you…?” and sets up a melodic motif that begins on the flatted 7th stepping down a half-step followed by the interval leap of a 4th. The alternative text of “Or would you” (See Figure 5b) is presented in upward movement and is used at the bridge and the pin-ultimate phrase at the end of the song. Notice notated “turn” in the melody for the word “cynical.” The charm of this song is in the use of suspensions, counter melodies and flat 9ths that show up in the inner voices of accompaniment including the unresolved cadential passage in the bridge section.
Figure 5b, “Bridge section,” *The Romance of a Lifetime*

```
Dm/A  Fdim Gm7  Gm/C  C  A7  Cm  D7
```

Or would you shut your eyes, Too worldly wise, And cynical? Would you

Kurt Weill and Sam Coslow  THE ROMANCE OF A LIFETIME  © 1958 by European American Music Corporation and Sam Coslow  © Renewed  All Rights Reserved  Used by Permission

*You Understand Me So* is another song in a tranquil ballad style shown in Figure 6, written with a traditional style verse and many interesting chords in the refrain.

Figure 6, *You Understand Me So* (Alan Jay Lerner, *Love Life* 1948)

```
Tranquillo  C  Cdim  Dm7  G7  C/E  Cdim  Dm7  Gm
```

You look at me  Gentle and kind...  And you can see  What’s on my mind...

Kurt Weill and Alan Jay Lerner  YOU UNDERSTAND ME SO  © 2002 by European American Music Corporation  All Rights Reserved  Used by Permission

By singing on and through the consonants expressly the singer can generate idiomatic slurs between the two syllables of the word “gentle” and between the two pitches for “What’s on” in the last measure (See figure 6). It is built around a harmonic progression
from C to C#dim to Dm7 that is very “telling” in the song’s original context. It sounds like a warm, joyful song (and can be sung as such), but in the show it had a bitterly ironic spirit, sung by an estranged husband and wife to people whom they had just met on a cruise ship.

Operatic Lyricism

Operatic lyricism is a feature in many songs Weill composed for principal roles, most notably for Street Scene, which Weill considered his American opera. Vocally, these songs are challenging due to the dramatic intensity, higher tessitura and the overall wide range written in the melody. The operatic quality required in these songs provides an effective balance between more dramatic passages and the more economical melodies.

The following figures are examples from one of Weill’s more daring songs, Somehow I Never Could Believe, from Street Scene, is a full-fledged operatic aria written for Broadway. Weill actually admitted that this aria was the reason he was so interested in completing the musical.\textsuperscript{131} Constructed of eight different sections, the text reflects on the character’s youth, her loveless marriage, and her hopes for the future, a through-composed aria that ends with a reprise of the opening music. “The aria lasts for six and a half minutes—dangerously long, as Weill knew….all embodied in tortuous Weillian harmonies that foreshadow her fate.”\textsuperscript{132} Although operatic in range and intensely dramatic, it is nonetheless another example of a text-melody written in a direct style that

\begin{footnotes}
\item Hirsch, 271.
\item Hirsch, 271
\end{footnotes}
has the rhythm and pace of natural everyday speech. Interestingly, Weill had urged Langston Hughes to rewrite the original lyrics in order to achieve “a more singable, smoother style that’s easier on the ear.” ¹³³

Figure 7a, Anna’s Aria, *Somehow I Never Could Believe* (Langston Hughes, *Street Scene* 1947)

Notice (in Figure 7a, above) the melodic rhythm of the phrases and the setting of key words of the text; *I, believe, meant, all,* are pitched higher and provide a clear, direct

¹³³ Quoted in Hirsch, 271.
impact of specific words the character would emphasize. This aria requires varying mood changes between sections and an operatic vocal production throughout. Figure 7b (below) illustrates one of the divisions of the aria that requires not only a change in tempo but in instrumentation (indicated in piano-vocal score), texture and vocal quality to spin more mood and insight into the character’s story.

Figure 7b, *Somehow I Never Could Believe*, mm.65-70

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Notice in Figure 7c below, the dynamics required in the vocal line and also in the accompaniment, the expressive markings (three fermatas in row with two in a high range, and the *appassionato* marking) as well as the high soprano tessitura. Vocally, this aria represents the opposite end of the spectrum than is normally found in musical theater repertoire.

Figure 7c, “Lento section,” *Somehow I Never Could Believe*, mm. 108-113
Textural Emphasis

Figure 8a, *A Boy Like You*, is notably less heavy than the aria from *Street Scene*. The song is light-hearted in character but still rangy with an operatic development of melodic material. The accompaniment is sparse at the beginning, *secco-accompagnato* style, under a short recitative that carefully supports the natural manner of text. This song illustrates the textural variations and countermelody that is abundant in Weill’s songs. The piano-vocal scores usually replicate the countermelodies in the piano part so it is important for these lines to be brought out vividly by the accompanist.

Figure 8a, Anna’s song, *A Boy Like You* (Langston Hughes, *Street Scene* 1947)

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Between vocal phrases and under sustained melodic notes the accompaniment displays the deeper more complex emotions of the character that have already been revealed earlier in the show through use of countermelody. Some countermelodies are featured as solo or linear passages (which in the orchestration are passed to various solo instruments to display different timbres and colors) as in Figure 8b and 8c below. Other countermelodies are broad sweeping passages of chordal textures, as in Figure 8d on the following page.

Figure 8b, *A Boy Like You* “countermelodies” mm. 7-8

![Figure 8b](image)

Figure 8c, *A Boy Like You* “countermelodies” mm. 30-32

![Figure 8c](image)
In the example above, the fourth measure (See Figure 8d) displays a final appearance of a bristling “fate chord” that foreshadows the singer’s fate. Again, the piano score is unable to reproduce the complete essence and impact of sonorities originally orchestrated for this song. But an accompanist can change the octaves of passages and can juxtapose chord tones for a closer order of fingering to bring out the interplay of textural changes in the accompaniment.
Lonely House, Sam’s arioso from Street Scene is one of the most compelling examples of song which blends both operatic and popular lyricism. In this song Weill fused jazz and operatic melody “into a powerful chiaroscuro” between the dark plodding dissonances in the lower voices of accompaniment and the brighter more intense range of the male tenor voice.\(^{134}\) Note the foreboding solo melodic motif in the introduction at measure 3 (Figure 9a). This counter-melodic motif appears throughout the song and depicts the “sighs” of the old house, the ominous sounds of the night.

Figure 9a, Sam’s arioso Lonely House (Langston Hughes, Street Scene 1947)

The verse in Figure 9b reveals clearly how a series of repeated pitches with a slight intervallic rise or fall at the end of phrases can accommodate even a talk-sing style and a natural pace of speech for the singer to articulate the key words. It is probably, and more importantly, a way for the vocal line to intermingle through the orchestrated “noises of the night” without overpowering that dramatic use of the music.

\(^{134}\) Hirsch, 270.
It is an expressive and bluesy melody with a downward glide effect again in measure 6 (See Figure 9b), between “breaths a sigh.” The consonant n’s, v, th, ng, and the kw sound of “quiet” should be emphasized and sung through, connecting to the vowel sounds for greater vocal fluidity. As such, the words will penetrate and generate an intensity that maximizes the nuances as the singer tells the story through the melody. The accompaniment is a dark jazzy harmonic riff, which portends the climactic tragedy of the plot. The Metropolitan Opera tenor, Brian Sullivan sings in the original cast recording of *Street Scene*. 
In the chorus/refrain of *Lonely House*, tones displaced by wide melodic leaps are counter-balanced by closer step-wise movement in the opposite direction especially when setting repeated key words as in “lonely” (See Figure 9c). It is notation that indicates precisely the desired “enunciation” and expression for the words.

Figure 9c, Sam’s arioso, *Lonely House* (Langston Hughes, *Street Scene*), Piano-vocal reduction, mm. 21-27

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Note the emphatic l’s and n of “lonely” and the m of “me” are all liquid, in other words “voiced” or singable consonants that when anticipated and elongated, contribute to a more natural nuance and emotional sense of text. The wide descending interval (minor 9th in the first measure) on “Lonely” (Figure 9c) calls for a listless downward portamento
(a lengthy melodic sigh) and an upward glide (on “lonely” in the third measure) and contributes to the sense of uncalculated movement, like a slow rhythmic drag in the vocal line. Where melody notes are sustained, the highly rhythmical accompaniment flashes intense bluesy countermelodies and reinforces a more projected tone by the singer (See Figure 9d).

Figure 9d, Lonely House, mm. 45-47

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Figure 10a, Rose’s song, What Good Would the Moon Be? (Langston Hughes, Street Scene), from sheet music mm. 16-18

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Also from *Street Scene*, *What Good Would the Moon Be?* (See Figure 10a) is a reflective slow foxtrot ballad which builds to semi-operatic treatment of melody at the end. The harmonic underpinnings showcase the subtle mood changes and emotions with chords shifting between major and minor or diminished harmonies. The sheet music version (Figure 10a) by comparison does not reference any countermelody important to the original intent of the song. Figure 10b below is an example from the vocal score which is more effective. To keep this rhythmic style from sounding square, or march-like, the downbeats should be de-emphasized and the countermelodies in the accompaniment should be highlighted (these do not appear in the sheet music or in the anthologies, but are outlined in the *Street Scenes* vocal–piano score).

Figure 10b, “Reprise” (countermelodies; texture; intra-textural interweaving of motifs)
Figure 10b (above) shows an instance of the important triplet motif in measure the second measure and countermelodies that are “weaved in” musically representing the emotional conflict with a male character who had just earlier been trying to entice this singer with stardom in another song (the melodic motif drawn from the other song is represented in Figure 10c below). In context to the show, Easter’s song is intra-texturally weaved or entwined with the other characters’ seduction song.

Figure 10c, “Intra-textural” material from Wouldn’t You Like to be on Broadway? (Easter’s song of seduction weaved into Rose’s song) mm. 17-19 “reprise”

The impact of the accompaniment is characteristically more interesting and revealing when performing with the vocal score from the dramatic work rather than the anthology. An interesting facet of accompaniment for the song is the interplay of countermelody as if it were another voice “in duet” with the melody adding another dimension of emotion. Another challenge is that the tessitura remains high at the end of the song where the melody is marked *forte* in dynamic level and increases in intensity through repeated motifs until the *piano* marking at the fermata (See Figure 10d below).
Figure 10d, *What Good Would the Moon Be?* mm. 33-end

Melodic Economy

While a number of Weill melodies are more operatic in design, other songs, represented in Figures 11 thru 16, for both male and female voices feature Weill’s skill of melodic economy. Melodies that were uncomplicated and spare in range were often written specifically for stars like Gertrude Lawrence and Walter Huston who were not very good singers but great actors. The songs are much simpler and limited in melodic range and phrasing to support both ease and drama in text delivery for actors who were capable of delivering a song. Broadway songs were so often a custom made job, composed on the spot, changed, or discarded in rehearsals. The following examples represent several songs from this category of melodically economical songs.

Figure 11, Liza’s song, Saga of Jenny (Ira Gershwin, Lady in the Dark)
Figure 12, Male voice, *Girl of the Moment* (Ira Gershwin, *Lady in the Dark*)

Refrain

Oh girl of the moment with the smile of the day,
And the charm of the week And the grace of the month,
And the looks of the year,

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Figure 13, Female lead, *One Life To Live* (Ira Gershwin, *Lady in the Dark*)

There are many minds in circulation,
Believing in reincarnation. In me you see One who does not a-

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Figure 14, Male lead, *Lost in the Stars* (Langston Hughes, *Lost in the Stars* 1949)

![Musical notation](image1)

Figure 15, Male voice, *The Little Gray House* (*Lost in the Stars* 1949)

![Musical notation](image2)
Rhythmic and Harmonic Considerations

From *One Touch of Venus* (1943), *Speak Low* (see Figure 17a) is an example of the type of song that was often subject to key changes depending on the performer. It is also a song that has been recorded by numerous artists in varying style. The original rehearsal score is marked “moderato assai” (generally slower) while an original holograph is marked “very rhythmical.” The melody is characteristic of fluctuating intervals, primarily fourths, triplets, and the initial rising sixth is quite lush sounding. With all its intervallic skips it flows nicely.
Speak Low features many sustained tones that gravitate to and from the pitch [A] and creates an aura of suspension that dramatically breaks into an aria-like intensity and a soaring melodic line in the bridge. The quarter-note triplet figures take place in beats 3 and 4 of each measure and provide the forward momentum of the song. Many of the melodic notes fall on the seventh or ninth of chord extensions and Weill even notates the popular stylizing of vocal mordents/turns.
Harmonically, Weill has taken a simple chord sequence of ii7 – V7 and used it in unexpected ways for ethereal sounding passages that do not resolve as expected. For example, measures 29-33 (see Figure 17b) vacillate between B-flat m (sus9) and E-flat 9, which is a key area modulation that still invokes ii7 – V7 sequence leading to F perhaps. Instead, the chord moves to G9, by third relation to the V of V.

Figure 17b, *Speak Low*, mm. 29 – 36

The eight measures of the Bridge section (see Figure 17c below) feature quarter-note triplets to begin each phrase, virtually a reversal of the rhythmic phrasing Weill used in the opening measures of the A section. The dotted half-note to quarter-note figure in
measures 39 and 44 maintains rhythmic momentum over a modified, shortened circle of 5ths progression. A heightened dramatic impact is created that spans an augmented ninth in the melody beginning with E-flat 2 on the word “time” which descends gradually to the penultimate note of the chorus section to return to F major.

Figure 17c, “Bridge section,” *Speak Low* mm. 37-45

Note that an erroneous comma separates the words “speak” and “love” in the opening measures of section A (Figure 17a) which, after the first printing of sheet music was “undoubtedly the contribution of a zealous editor overly concerned with 1940s usage
and punctuation." The lyrics actually germinated from “Speak low, if you speak love” from Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* where “love” was not meant as a term of endearment but replaced instead the more prosaic idea “of love” or “about love.”

To refer back to a previous point about the printed versions of musical theater repertoire, it is important to note that these very basic versions, such as sheet music, simplify not only the harmonies but the original rhythmic style. For an accurate rendering of *Speak Low*, two styles seem to work very well, the swing-based style and the beguine. Both work and suit the original intent, but one has to be careful not to allow too much piano voicing to interfere with or overpower the vocal line.

An interesting point to remember is that the ballroom and dance bands were customary fixtures in America during the Swing era of the 1940s and through the 1950s and, as Allen Forte described, the music from this period was danced to as well as sung and performed instrumentally. Both Kim Kowalke, one of the most respected Weill scholars and Lys Symonette, Weill’s musical assistant on Broadway, a vocal coach, and executor in the Kurt Weill Foundation, have insisted that while Weill was a purist in the theater, that theater performances or recordings have to be done as orchestrated, “outside the theater Weill didn’t care about arrangements” [and was pleased to hear popular versions].

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136 Ibid.
137 Quoted in Hirsch, 343.
IX. CONCLUSION

Music history asserts that influential composers have consistently expanded the language and vocabulary of music and piqued emotions relative to vital contemporary issues. To this end Kurt Weill has succeeded in influential works composed for both European opera-theater and the relatively new American genre of musical theater. Fitting examples are found in the timely themes of Weill’s *Lost in the Stars, Love Life, Street Scene* and even *Lady in the Dark*. These works, along with more familiar standards, illuminate an American repertoire that was consciously art music rather than popular, and was inherently intimate in approach.

Astute and sensitive to dramatic setting and staging, Weill precisely structured his scores around the texts and the presence or charisma of individual performers. Overall, Weill’s music powerfully projects the words and emphasizes the emotional undercurrents that are implied in the text rather than just the surface meaning of the words. Cohesion in the music is a result of the voice leading. Ostinatos and pedal tones are typical throughout, as are the inner harmonic fluctuations, which convey the emotions intended in the song.

Weill’s songs often showcase a style that blends both classical and popular technique, gained from a thoroughly American influence of a more oratorical communicative approach for singing. The primary objective is to tell the story through song. The technique involves approaching the lyrics as artful prose sung more in the rhythmic manner text would be spoken, in a natural direction of speech. Because both
intelligibility and true spirit of the lyrics is essential, an expressive believable quality is important in performance. Enunciation of words, an understanding in the use of rubato, and the ability to use “voice-leading” consonants is vital to the singing style. Singer-actors such as Ethel Waters, John Raitt, Alfred Drake and other “no-frills” vocalists such as Frank Sinatra, Rosemary Clooney and Eileen Farrell are exceptionally skilled interpreters of the style. Eileen Farrell (1920-2002), stellar operatic performer and voice teacher, says she learned the style from the famous jazz singer Mabel Mercer. After evenings of singing at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, Farrell would hurry over to hear Mercer’s last nightclub set of the evening.

The problem with singers trained for opera, when they sing this music, is that they tend to think of the voice first and the words second. But the words are the most important thing. At Indiana University, where I taught for 9 years, I found that the theater kids got it better than the voice students, because they understood that.138

With new demands in the voice-teaching field for non-classical singing technique and the current interest in musical theater styles, a historical perspective of American musical theater performance practice should include the influence of Kurt Weill. Curriculums in musical theater programs most certainly include the early Weill-Brecht practices of modern epic theater. But the influence of Weill in the conventional practices of musical theater in America is generally not well known. The rise in popularity of the music theater degree on university campuses means more and more teachers and singers

need resources and information pertaining to music theater singing and style techniques. New musical theater repertoire and staging practices require singing that is more dramatic than vocal. Contemporary opera producers emphasize the importance of believable acting. As well, many current composers are writing songs requiring popular style techniques. Numerous new works written for classically trained singers require vocal flexibility and techniques traditionally used in popular styles. Additionally, teachers often depend on their students to provide songs for study outside of the classical repertoire. Unfortunately, most students interested in these styles are familiar with only songs they have heard from the most recently opened shows and recordings.

The specifically American repertoire that is represented here can be used as a teaching tool for students to strengthen the experience of singing in their own language, relating and communicating more effectively. There is remarkable musical variety within the scope of Weill’s compositional style. Weill’s American musical theater songs are an often overlooked part of the quintessentially American repertoire. More art song than popular, more theater than opera, they are universal dramas in miniature, as are many of the most enduring songs from musical theater’s golden era.

Amid the “mosaic” that contemporary American culture has come to reflect, Weill’s last songs remain distinct and unique. More accurately, these songs represent a true “melting pot;” the synthesis of an individual’s musical roots with thoroughly American conventions, which more often than not have resulted in innovation, originality and an enduring quality.
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"Lonely House" pg. 115
"A Boy Like You" pg. 207
Additional: "Wouldn't You Like to Be on Broadway?" pg. 121 mm 1-8

Kurt Weill Songs - A Centennial vol. 1:
"I'm A Stranger Here Myself" pg. 145
"Lost in the Stars" pg. 201
"My Ship" pg. 250
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"September Song" pg. 162
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