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Money, Love, and Freedom:

Assessments of Modernity in the Operas of Ernst Krenek and Bertolt Brecht

Emily McArthur

Research Methods in History

2005

Shrill whistles and long boos filled the auditorium, while in the corners fist-fights broke out. Momentarily ignored in all the fracas, the performers of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* soldiered on through the clamor towards the conclusion of Kurt Weill's and Bertolt Brecht's latest operatic collaboration. Before the curtain could close, "the theatre was a screaming mass of people"<sup>1</sup> as audience members tried to scramble onto stage to escape the riot.<sup>2</sup> The scandal surrounding the 1930 Leipzig premier was exacerbated by Nazi Brown Shirts marching in protest outside the concert hall.

Why would so many middle- and upper-class members of German society—as well as the National Socialist Party, which would ban the opera upon its rise to power just three years later—protest this work? This was not the first opera to incorporate jazz forms, nor was it the first to focus on the life and values of the common man rather than those of the elite classes.<sup>3</sup> But Brecht's libretto for *Mahagonny* did present, through its explicit descriptions of violence, avarice, and licentiousness, a truly disturbing caricature of the morals of contemporary society. Though the work ultimately condemns the morality it portrays, the upper strata of Weimar society saw in his writing a (perhaps frighteningly accurate) portrait of themselves and began throwing punches.

But not all operas of the Weimar Republic dealt with the changes associated with modernity so harshly. Ernst Krenek's *Jonny Spielt Auf*<sup>4</sup> uses the example of the black American Johnny, a jazz musician in Paris, to show the blessed freedom associated with the imported values of modern America. This work, premiered three years before Brecht's, takes an entirely

<sup>1</sup> A. R. Braunmuller, *Introduction to The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> One unfortunate lady suffered a "heart spasm," according to Frederic Ewen in *Bertolt Brecht: His Life, Art, and Times* (New York: The Citadel, 1967), 191.

<sup>3</sup> On both counts, *Mahagonny* was preceded by Brecht and Weill's *Dreigroschenoper*, premiered in 1928.

<sup>4</sup> Premiered on 10 February, 1927. Tellingly, no riots broke out in reaction to the premiere, which brought the previously little-known Krenek considerable success.

different attitude towards contemporary society. The avarice, violence, and licentiousness that Brecht so heartily condemns become, in Krenek's eyes, not symptoms of societal malaise but rather the results of the modern Western culture of liberation and individualism. These traits are not evil; they are merely the natural outgrowth of the great gift of the modern era: individual freedom.

Through their respective examinations of the issue of freedom, the discontinuity between Brecht's and Krenek's assessments of their society becomes clear. Both authors tackled the pivotal issues of personal morality, freedom, and money, and both saw America as the source for the new value systems they were observing. But despite these similarities, the authors derived their conclusions from their very different views on the proper political system for governing Germany. Krenek, a traditional liberal with high hopes for Germany's Weimar Republic, believed that total freedom would lead to self-actualization—the development of an individual's inner self to the point that it achieves its full potential—while Brecht, an ardent socialist, maintained that the freedom and capitalism promoted by America, the evangelist of modernity during the interwar years, would end in chaos, destruction, and the inevitable revolution of the proletariat. The librettos of Brecht and Krenek are emblematic of the enormous changes and deep divides in Germany during the 1920s and show the attitudes towards them from two different points on the political spectrum. How did these two authors weave their political opinions about Weimar Germany into their great works of culture? And how did they use their operas to present their visions of the future of money, love, and freedom?

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The political and social values of Brecht and Krenek must be set within the context of the drastic changes taking place in Germany during the interwar years. The Weimar Republic,

wracked with political and cultural conflicts, heralded a troubled democratization and the introduction of mass culture in Germany. Because of this, many scholars see the era as the dawn of “the modern” in Germany. But the nation’s very traditional imperial past made the transition into modernity a rocky one.

Imperial German society exhibited, according to Peter Longerich, deep contradictions, intense social tensions, and an energetic political atmosphere.<sup>5</sup> The Reichstag, or Parliament, despite its experiments with universal male suffrage, lacked much real power, since the chancellor was not forced to answer to it. It pacified the upper classes by granting many privileges to the nobility and large land-holders. The middle classes, too, were largely satisfied, enjoying considerable freedom and steadily increasing wealth.<sup>6</sup> By maintaining a “conspicuously traditional,” rank-oriented political structure and consciously opposing the modernist movement in the arts, the conservative party stayed in power until the the First World War.<sup>7</sup> Among the lower classes, however, the increasing social stratification only intensified perceived class tensions. According to Longerich, three main political camps emerged in pre-war Germany: the socialist workers, the bourgeois middle class, and the conservative agrarians.<sup>8</sup> The power struggles among these three groups in the post-war era would chiefly determine the tone of Brecht’s and Krenek’s social commentaries.

World War I marked a great watershed in terms of German politics and culture. Frederick Ewen, in his biographical study of Bertolt Brecht, approaches the problem of modernity by examining its roots in the conclusion of World War I. The disaffection regarding the Treaty of Versailles, he claims, formed the basis of Germany’s mistrust of the modern values.

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Longerich, *Deutschland 1918-1933: Die Weimarer Republik* (Hannover: Fackelträger, 1995), 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Longerich, 23.

This discontent began during the war years, when Germany's increasingly gloomy prospects led to growing rates of dissatisfaction and desertion among the armed forces. When in 1918 general strikes and military mutinies forced the abdication of the Kaiser, various workers' councils (mostly leftist) met together to elect a new government, which would become Germany's first republic. A few years of general chaos followed, rife with assassinations and strikes. According to Ewen, this fatally damaged perceptions of the left among the more traditional factions of society. Thus the prospects of democratic government in Germany were poor from Weimar's very inception. "With the left temporarily out of the way," Ewen asserts, "the path was opened for the rightists and nationalists to prepare the grave for the infant Weimar Republic."<sup>9</sup>

"The republic which nobody wanted,"<sup>10</sup> Alex de Jonge terms Weimar Germany in *The Weimar Chronicle: Prelude to Hitler*. The majority German Social-Democratic party was torn from the very beginning between two warring factions: the more centrist Republicans and the "Reds," or revolutionary socialists. The army, a "state within a state" according to de Jonge, wanted nothing to do with either.<sup>11</sup> The early years of the Republic saw the formation of the nationalist *Freikorps* militias to battle the feared Bolsheviks and also the massive inflation that destroyed the purchasing power of the middle class along with their traditional values.<sup>12</sup> "There was a general feeling," writes de Jonge, "that an old and decent society was being destroyed."<sup>13</sup>

Despite these early fascist forebodings, however, a permissively liberal culture flourished in Germany during the Weimar years. Peter Gay notes, "The Republic was marked by creativity

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Ewen, *Bertolt Brecht: His Life, His Art, and His Times* (New York: Citadel, 1967), 51.

<sup>10</sup> Alex de Jonge, *The Weimar Chronicle: Prelude to Hitler* (New York: Meridian, 1978), 28.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Weimar's middle class, made up of professors, lawyers, and other professionals, were often on a fixed income and therefore were most devastated by uncontrolled inflation.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

in the midst of suffering, hard work in the midst of repeated disappointments.”<sup>14</sup> As the subtitle of his *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* points out, the Weimar Republic brought to power the intellectuals who had been ostracized for propagating modernism under the imperial order.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps because of the breadth of their dreams for a new, re-ordered Germany, the beliefs of these men and women spilled over from their political actions into the cultural atmosphere of the period. According to scholars Stephen Lamb and Anthony Phelan, the founders of the Republic had to reform both politics and culture or else run the risk of failing in both spheres.<sup>16</sup> The democratization of government, then, must also extend to cultural forms to have any hope of success. Whereas Germany for centuries had been known for its high culture, for Wagner and Goethe and the Romantics, the Weimar years would lead to a great democratization of culture, or, as Lamb and Phelan call it, a cultural Renaissance for the common man.<sup>17</sup> This was the era of workers’ choirs and social clubs. It was also the age of the jazz operas of Brecht and Krenek. Many Germans, and especially those in the upper strata, felt threatened by the social leveling foreboded by these changes. Lamb and Phelan explain that “their culture had been transformed to the point of unrecognizability,”<sup>18</sup> which naturally bred some reluctance in the minds of some about accepting these changes. This might explain why the (mostly upper class) audience at *Mahagonny*’s premiere reacted so violently to what they saw there.

Other Germans were more measured in their response and tried to give changes flooding Germany an impartial evaluation. The *Neue Sachlichkeit* (or New Objectivity) movement intended to examine the new culture from a bit of a distance--to give “a cool assessment of

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<sup>14</sup> Gay, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Gay, 5,6.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Lamb and Anthony Phelan, “Weimar Culture: The Birth of Modernism,” in *Germany: Cultural Studies, an Introduction*, Ed. Rob Burns (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), 64.

modern society, sometimes merely registering the development of modern technologies while at others fiercely criticizing their social mores.”<sup>19</sup> In her book *Visions of Modernity*, Mary Nolan contends that the intellectuals of this movement accepted the economic and political changes brought by American-style democracy and mass culture; they debated, however, “whether economic modernity . . . inherently required or inevitably produced not only new products and styles of consumption but also new men and women.”<sup>20</sup> Both Brecht and Krenek would have agreed that the modern age would radically transform Germany’s concept of individuality.

Whether or not Weimar culture marked a complete break with traditional German culture is a debate that will perhaps never be resolved. Either way, this breach is exactly what conservative Germans feared. Peter Gay argues that Germany’s collective mythos was heavily ingrained in the populace but that the Republic’s disconnect from Germany’s history and its glorification of the common man above the grand hero or *Übermensch* required it to turn its back on its mythology.<sup>21</sup> The period’s more conservative historians, Gay says, despised this culture gap and “lent themselves in collective volume after collective volume proclaiming to an incredulous world the superiority of German *Kultur* over the mere *civilization* of the Allied powers.”<sup>22</sup> Such writings hardened the minds of the conservative elements of Germany’s population against the ideals of Brecht and Krenek. Lamb and Phelan sum up this problem well: Weimar’s artistic community was rich beyond parallel, but the conservative classes of society—soldiers, nationalists, university professors, and educated middling-burghers—never truly accepted it.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lamb and Phelan, 65.

<sup>18</sup> Lamb and Phelan, 62.

<sup>19</sup> Lamb and Phelan, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 108.

<sup>21</sup> Gay, 87.

<sup>22</sup> Gay, 91.

<sup>23</sup> Lamb and Phelan, 60.



The societal changes rocking Germany in the post-World War I years were immense and unprecedented. For the first time, industrialization brought about a leveling of society as the more technically-oriented *Realschulen* and *Oberrealschulen* were accorded equal status to the more academic and bourgeois schools, the *Gymnasien* in 1900.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the *Allgemeiner deutscher Frauenverein* was advocating new advances in women's rights, including better access to school and work, reformed marriage rights, and the elimination of the sexual double standard.<sup>25</sup> The period did, in fact, see huge changes in the way Germans approached love, sex, and romance and marked a revolution of sexual liberation, both in individual lives and in the press (due to the decline of censorship.)<sup>26</sup> These radical social changes soon, through the efforts of such composers as Weill and Krenek, migrated into the musical realm. According to Michael Von der Linn, more conservative Weimar reviewers criticized contemporary music not because of its technical innovations but because of the ideas it represented.<sup>27</sup> These critics "believed that music had become a vehicle for sexually perverse, brutal, and seamy ideas."<sup>28</sup> Thus Weimar culture itself increased the discord between the various political factions.

In 1924 American aid in the form of the Dawes Plan lent a crutch to the hobbling Weimar Republic, and along with the investment dollars came the commercialized entertainments of American culture, from early Hollywood films to jazz. Most scholars agree that conservative Germans perceived these American influences to be a threat to what it meant to be German. An American, says author Peter Berg in *Deutschland und Amerika*, focuses on the practical and doesn't bother himself with the deeper issues of the spirit. This stands in stark opposition to the

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Von der Linn, *Degeneration, Neoclassicism, and the Weimar-Era Music of Hindemith, Krenek, and Weill*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1999) 12.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Von der Linn, 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

typical Germans, who “*um des bloßen Denkens willen denken*,”<sup>29</sup> and who are quite proud of that fact. Finally, David Midgley comments that America’s mass consumer culture and perceived cultural uniformity further disturbed conservative Germans, who saw the whole nation moving towards one democratized mass.<sup>30</sup>

What these critics feared, in short, was exactly what writers like Ernst Krenek were promoting. While Krenek fits easily into the stereotypical mold of a liberal post-war German intellectual itching for a new social order, the exact direction of Brecht’s thought is harder to pin down. A socialist who despised and feared the growing Nazi movement in his homeland, Brecht was equally leery of the carefree capitalism of the Weimar Republic. Thus his appraisal of modern libertine morals in *Mahagonny* could easily have been approved by the Nazis. His critique of Weimar’s greed and commercialization in the form of the imagined city of Mahagonny, however, earned their instant disapproval.

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A city where all the traditional "don'ts" of society—gluttony, licentiousness, violence, drunkenness—are officially sanctioned, where money can buy every conceivable vice: this is what the fugitive founders of Mahagonny sought to create in their new city. Brecht’s and Weill’s opera traces the history of this city from its rise, promising seven days a week of relaxation (for only a small fee), to its fall, destroyed by the money-lust of its founders. Although vice and leisure appear to be the central attractions in Mahagonny, the city is really founded on the greed of its unholy trinity of creators: the Widow Begbick, Fatty, and Trinity Moses. As the biblical adage goes, the love of money is the root of all evil, and from these tangled origins a spreading tree of iniquity grows up in Mahagonny. When the original,

<sup>29</sup> Peter Berg, *Deutschland und Amerika, 1918-1929*, (Lübeck and Hamburg: Matthiesen, 1963) 133. Trans: “think just for the sake of thinking”

carefully planned and regulated Mahagonny fails to bring in enough clients, the three founders decide they will permit everything, and the mantra of the city becomes:

One means to eat all you are able;  
Two, to change your loves about;  
Three means the ring and gaming table;  
Four, to drink until you pass out.  
Moreover, better get it clear  
That Don'ts are not permitted here.<sup>31</sup>

For each of these liberties, though, the men must pay a hefty price, and the purely commercial nature of this system eventually drives it to its destruction. Brecht makes his most poignant commentary on the values of Weimar Germany when he tackles this problem of money, and especially the complex relationship between mankind's desire to purchase happiness and the enslavement to money that brings.

Krenek's *Jonny Spielt Auf* takes a more positive look at the ethics of modernity. On the surface, the tale is one of love, theft, and escape. But the deeper theme is liberation, and in particular, the moral liberation brought by Americanization. The tale revolves around a cast of characters that effectively symbolize the great chasm that existed in Krenek's mind between Europe and America. On the eastern side of the Atlantic, according to Krenek, exists only profound unhappiness and eventual death. We see this from the opening scene, in which Max, a classical composer, glories in the noon-day brightness of a glacier. Krenek shows through the metaphor of the glacier--pure white, cold, and barely moving--Max's moral attitudes to be those of old Europe: detached, emotionless, and all but unchanging. Yet Max sees it as "the symbol of form, of nature structurally expressed, of life realized."<sup>32</sup> Max, obsessed from the outset with

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<sup>30</sup> David Midgley, *Writing Weimar*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 22.

<sup>31</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976) 68. Trans.: "Erstens, vergesst nicht, kommt das Fressen. Zweitens kommt der Liebesakt. Drittens das Boxen nicht vergessen. Viertens Saufen, laut Kontrakt. Vor allem aber achtet scarf dass man hier alles dürfen darf."

<sup>32</sup> Krenek, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1963) 6. "Er ist mir Symbol der Gestalt, der geformten Natur, des gefassten Lebens."

structure, cannot, at first, conceive of a fulfilled life outside of the context of the rigid moral constructions with which he is already well acquainted.

Many of Germany's bourgeoisie could certainly relate to this discomfort with a fast-paced, morally changing world, but Krenek does not put much effort into portraying Max sympathetically. Instead, he introduces the wild and carefree Johnny, who, according to the *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, represents the "new man free from sexual and musical" as well as moral inhibitions.<sup>33</sup> This African-American jazz musician living in Paris is the ambassador of American-style liberty to the closed minds of Europe. Johnny presents the traditional Max and his lover Anita, who herself is slowly transitioning from a European to American mindset, with the opportunity to immigrate to America, a move which will give them a new outlook on life as well as lucrative career opportunities.

In Krenek's work, money--or at least the acquisition of material goods--is the great goal for which all liberated people should be striving. If relationships must suffer in the pursuit of this objective, then that is simply what must be. Krenek celebrates the individual and his desires above all. Johnny, of course, exemplifies this attitude. He has intense desires, first for the singer Anita, then for the beautiful instrument of the violinist Daniello, and he does not let his sometime girlfriend Yvonne stand in the way of pursuing either. When Anita rejects his advances,<sup>34</sup> he turns the whole of his attention towards the acquisition of the violin, a hunt which fulfills him, it seems, quite as much as any relationship. He refers to the violin as "my dear one" and "my love"<sup>35</sup> and, leaving Yvonne and his job in Paris to pursue it, shows to what lengths a liberated individual will go to realize his desires.

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<sup>33</sup> Stanley Sadie, ed., "Jonny Spielt Auf," *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1992) 918.

<sup>34</sup> Krenek, 14. Anita does, however, feel some elemental attraction and speaks of "that urge of the blood which I cannot resist" when Johnny makes his proposition to her.

When Yvonne is finally reconciled to Johnny, just as all must eventually be to the values he represents, she questions the morality of his actions, asking him whether the violin he is pursuing so single-mindedly belongs to him. “Everything that’s worth having in this world belongs to me,” he responds.<sup>36</sup> This exclamation, punctuating Johnny’s libertine behavior, typifies what Krenek believes about American capitalist values. One must simply decide what is worth having, then pursue it untiringly using whatever means necessary. This is, for him, a peculiarly American sort of freedom--the freedom of acquisition.

This freedom is contagious. Anita, under the influence of her manager, signs a contract to go sing in America. Though she wants Max to come with her to America, her first priority is to make it to her ship on time. Sitting on the train, she wonders to herself if he will come.<sup>37</sup> Under the old European order, she would have jumped off the train and run to him. But she has accepted the value system of Johnny and her manager and instead puts her individual monetary interests first. As her manager declares, “What do I care about humanity! It interferes with my business.”<sup>38</sup>

The business leaders of Brecht’s Mahagonny<sup>39</sup> would certainly agree with Johnny’s modern interpretation of business ethics. Brecht emphasizes the value of money to Mahagonny’s founders from the first moment of his libretto, when an arrest warrant for Moses, Fatty, and Begbick on the charges of “violence, forgery, and fraud,”—all crimes closely associated with money—is projected on a screen. The three are still fleeing punishment for the greedy crimes of their previous lives when they hatch a new scheme to make money: a “Netzstadt,” or net city.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 20, 28.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 40. Trans.: “Mir gehört alles, was gut ist in der Welt.”

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 58. Trans.: “In wenigen Sekunden geht der Zug, und nimmermehr soll ich ihn wiedersehen!”

<sup>38</sup> Krenek, 52. Trans.: “Was kümmert mich die Menschlichkeit? Sie stört nur mein Geschäft.”

<sup>39</sup> Brecht locates his fictional city somewhere between Alaska and San Francisco, yet at the same time on the Gulf Coast near Pensacola.

The Widow Begbick says, “We will make it a snare plump little birds will be eager to enter. . . . For the deep craving of man is not to suffer but to do as he pleases. This is our golden secret.”<sup>40</sup> Everywhere else in the world, the day-to-day, backbreaking efforts to succeed reign supreme. Only the promise of eternal leisure, free-flowing whiskey, and even freer girls will lure the little birds into the net of Mahagonny, and this bit of knowledge is truly “golden” because it will not only attract men, but also convince them to spend all they have in search of Mahagonny’s particular breed of happiness. Mahagonny, then, is the city that personifies the values of Weimar Germany according to Brecht: the twin loves of money and freedom.

Unfortunately for the immigrants to Mahagonny, the love of money exercises a cruel tyranny over their freedom. Although Begbick, Fatty, and Moses center the city on the As-You-Like-It Tavern and intend for it to be a haven for men captured by the toils of modern life, and although they do indeed provide those who arrive with liquor and girls (for a price), not all of those who arrive are happy with the conditions in Mahagonny. As Jake, Bill, Joe, and Jim—four recently-arrived leisure converts who have been toiling in Alaska—make their way into the city, the little birds the Widow Begbick hoped to attract are flocking to leave. This disgusts Begbick, who must lower the prices in the city, but Jim and his friends enter nonetheless, coming “to see what Mahagonny has to sell.”<sup>41</sup> Despite some apprehensions, the men from Alaska, the land of cold and hard work, have been caught in Mahagonny’s alcohol-warmed snare.

Obediently the men hand over their money to the city’s founders in exchange for their girls and gin, but absolute freedom has not yet been fully awakened in Mahagonny. Though all in the Net City is agreeable, comfortable, and quiet, many things are yet forbidden by the stern Widow Begbick. A formidable woman, she instructs the men not to spit, curse, or sing lewd

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<sup>40</sup> Brecht, 33. Trans.: “Denn es ist die Wollust der Männer nicht zu leiden und alles zu dürfen. Das ist der Kern des Goldes.

songs in her tavern despite her promises that, in Mahagonny, men can “do as they please.” Because the deception, the perceptive and strong-willed Jim is ready to leave just a short time after coming to the city. “I’m sick of seeing the word ‘Forbidden,’” he exclaims as he tries to escape.<sup>42</sup> The lack of freedom makes the place deadly dull for him. For an independent modern man like Jim, not all the fishing, alcohol, and ersatz-wives that Mahagonny could offer can replace liberty.

Brecht’s commentary here on the values of modernity in his homeland is disturbing. Jim desires above all else the ability to do as he pleases, but what is it specifically that he desires? Vice, Jim answers, complaining that in Mahagonny “there’s too much charity and too much concord, and there is too much to build all [man’s] trust upon.”<sup>43</sup> Brecht makes Jim representative of Weimar decadence but also trapped in the very lifestyle that he thought would make him free. Jim craves the liberty to do exactly what he pleases, even if that infringes on the rights of those around him. For that kind of freedom to be granted, Mahagonny must be transformed from a city of amicability into a city of strife and jealousy.

The founders of Mahagonny, always eager for advice on how to increase their profit margins, take Jim’s words about loosening the Net City’s regulations very seriously. So they decide to take advantage of every resource they have to save their city from bankruptcy, even if that means resorting to unsavory tactics. When a hurricane and subsequent financial crisis finally bring the city to a sort of turning point, the Alaskan men and the founders sing together, led by Jim, “So if someone must kick, that is my part, and if another get kicked, that’s for you!”<sup>44</sup> This grim assessment of capitalist ethics is typical of what Brecht sees happening in

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<sup>41</sup> Brecht, 45.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 49. Trans.: “Weil ich eine Tafel sehen mußte darauf stand: Hier ist verboten.”

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 58. Trans.: “Ach, mit eurem ganzen Mahagonny wird nie ein Mensch glücklich werden, weil zu viele Ruhe herrscht und zu viel Eintracht, und weil’s zu viel gibt woran man sich halten kann.”

contemporary Germany. The founders kick the patrons, eager to wring another dollar from their wallets, and the patrons kick each other, both literally and metaphorically. In short, violence and vice usurp the thrones of leisure and peace in Mahagonny, leaving a place where nothing earns respect but the almighty dollar and the freedom to live as one pleases that it can buy.

One might expect that Jim, the devil's advocate in Mahagonny, would prove nimble enough to handle that freedom and avoid getting "kicked" by those around him. But instead he loses himself in Mahagonny's same old promises of happiness and allows the founders to financially exploit him in order to gain it. In the refrain repeated by the men of Mahagonny in many of the scenes in the second act, every imaginable kind of immorality is blessed by the founders, while any prohibitions are expressly forbidden. Because he commits mentioned by the chorus--gluttony, lechery, violence, gambling, and drinking--Jim, who himself introduced them to Mahagonny, incurs a serious loss, either of friend, woman, or, worst of all, money.

This attempt at fulfillment through moral license, the highest goal of modern man according to *Mahagonny's* first act, in the second becomes subservient to the love of money. Supreme moral liberty is therefore imprisoning, for any liberty which is slave to a lust is no liberty at all. For example, in a scene of disgusting gluttony, one of Jim's companions eats himself to death while crying out for more food. "In the end I shall have rest. To forget is sweet," he cries, to which the chorus responds, "Smith went the whole hog, and Smith has fulfilled himself."<sup>45</sup> This is the sort of satisfaction that Mahagonny offers: the type upon which one gorges until one chokes. Jim sees this happen to his friend Smith, but he does not realize that he too will choke on the lifestyle Mahagonny is feeding him.

Jim ignores another warning of Mahagonny's true character when his girlfriend Jenny,

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64. Trans.: "Und wenn einer tritt, dann bin ich es, und wird einer getreten, bist's du!"

<sup>45</sup> Brecht, 69. Trans.: "Ist es weg, dann hab ich Ruh, weil ich vergeß." "Weil er sich gefüllt hat. . ."



one of the infamous girls of the town whom he “rented” as a companion upon his entrance, hints at her true reason for remaining with him. As the two watch a pair of cranes flying over head, Jim asks her, “When will they veer asunder?” “Soon,” replies Jenny, using the cranes to symbolize her own relationship with Jim.<sup>46</sup> When he runs out of money, she will feel free to “change [her] loves about” and leave him.

In fact, Jim does run out of money very soon, and that makes him no longer welcome in Mahagonny. He tries to convince Jenny and his old friends from Alaska to loan him the funds he needs to pay his debts, but they have completely embraced the monetary morality promoted by Mahagonny’s founders and refuse to give him aid. In Mahagonny, there is neither love or friendship where money is not available, for, as Moses queries, “What man’s viler than a broke one? This is a capital offense!”<sup>47</sup> Modern capitalist values have totally failed him, and he is executed. Here in his conclusion Brecht states most explicitly his problem with Weimar culture: being poor is quite the same as being thrown to the dogs. If one cannot afford to buy into society, as so many of Brecht’s fellow socialists could not, then one will certainly suffer for that poverty.

In Krenek’s opera, of course, there is no discussion of poverty beyond Johnny’s ascent to wealth through theft. Here it is not capitalist ethics but the old European system--the romanticism espoused by the violinist Daniello--that have failed, while the values of America, especially individual liberty, have triumphed. Krenek shows Johnny to be the ultimate liberated individual, completely free to pursue his sexual and monetary ambitions without ties to conventional moral or family values. He is “the greatest of all masters” because he is master of

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 73. Trans.: “Wann werden sie sich trennen?” “Bald.”

<sup>47</sup> Brecht, 85.

himself.<sup>48</sup> Max, on the other hand, is metaphorically fettered. He cannot abide modernity's rapid pace of change and therefore hides himself away in the mountains. Unable to achieve happiness by himself, he is completely dependent on Anita for his sense of self-worth. Max and Johnny clearly assume opposing stances vis-à-vis social mores (at least until Max himself leaves to start a new life in America), and the conflict between the two represents the opposing forces--those of East and West, Europe and America--between which Krenek sees Weimar Germany being torn.

It is Johnny, naturally, who first sets down for us the break between Europe and America. He has just stolen the magnificent violin of the classical performer Daniello (to whom, he contends, it did not really belong at all) and intends to use it for his own lucrative purpose: jazz.<sup>49</sup> Just as Daniello couldn't really own the violin because he had not discovered the true purpose for which the violin was created, the Old World could not really possess its own cultural heritage for, as Johnny explains, "The Old World gave birth to the good things, but it doesn't know what to do with them. And so the New World comes crossing the sea in radiance and inherits ancient Europe by means of the dance."<sup>50</sup>

This metaphor of the dance will continue throughout the rest of the opera. The work closes, in fact, with the scene of Johnny standing atop a globe, playing his violin as the chorus dances around him, proclaiming, "The New World comes across the sea in radiance and inherits ancient Europe by means of the dance!"<sup>51</sup> America, by knowing this real purpose of music, becomes Krenek's ideal of what is right with the West and wrong with the East, not only in music but in the rest of life as well. Dancing inherently implies motion and action; only the fit

<sup>48</sup> Krenek, 12. Trans.: "Er ist der grösste Meister!"

<sup>49</sup> Krenek, 40. "I will praise Jehovah, who created violins for jazz-violinists!" Trans.: "und preisen Jehova, der die Violinen für die Jazzgeiger erschuf."

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 40. Trans.: "Die alte Welt hat es erzeugt, weiss damit nichts mehr zu tun. Da kommt die neue Welt übers Meer gefahren mit Glany. Und erbt das alte Europa durch den Tanz."

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 60. Trans.: "Es kommt die neue Welt übers Meer gefahren mit Glany underbt das alte Europa durch den Tanz."

and the self-confident can participate. These virtues will prove to be ones highly admired by Krenek in the work, and his heroine Anita will have to acquire them before she can complete her journey from Old World to New. Her transformation is one we will call, for lack of a better term, self-actualization--a conscious crossing of the limiting boundaries she has accumulated over the course of her life in the Old World. From the first moment we meet her character as she wanders lost through the Alps, we see that she is afraid of being--and dying--alone.<sup>52</sup> To prevent this, she takes Max to be her lover (which leads him to the rapturous announcement that he is "happy once more."), but he alone cannot make her happy. She must learn to find her value in herself.

Her redeeming moment comes just before she is seduced by the handsome violinist Daniello. All her other lovers, she explains to him, have only wanted her for what she could give to them.<sup>53</sup> In submitting to this manipulation, she suddenly realizes, she has been cutting off a valuable part of herself: her self-confidence. Her tryst with Daniello changes all that. Confident as she never was with Max, she announces to him that she is leaving on the next train. "How is it that you've grown so wise, all of a sudden?" Daniello demands. "I learn by experience," Anita responds.<sup>54</sup> What she has learned, put simply, is that trying to define any one person is impossible. She cannot even speak definitively about her own soul, which she says "is still an enigma to me myself."<sup>55</sup> All the old labels she has lived by no longer apply; all that is left to her is to celebrate her individualism and suck the potential from each moment.<sup>56</sup> This moment of self-actualization plants Anita in the soil of the New World just as firmly as Johnny himself, and therefore it is quite natural that Anita's next step will be to emigrate to America, where her

<sup>52</sup> Krenek, 4. "Death immeasurable! Dread of solitude!" Trans.: "Du grenzenloser Tod! Angst vor Einsamkeit!"

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 22. Trans.: Daniello: "Du sprichst ja so weise plötzlich?" Anita: "Ich lerne durch meine Erfahrungen."

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 22.

talents will earn her much more money. Here, we imagine, her journey of liberation will be complete.

Krenek presents freedom in his libretto as an inherently positive trait, a gift given to those humans who learn how to access it. At the beginning of the opera only Johnny has truly realized the potential of his freedom, and his actions, which are often precisely the opposite of those expected of him by society, reflect a real freedom from outside influence. When he first meets the lovely Anita and lusts after her, for instance, he immediately makes his desires known. “Be kind just once--you’ll never see me again!” he cries to her, obviously completely unhindered by beliefs about the impropriety of such a short-term affair.<sup>57</sup> The Italian violinist Daniello, on the other hand, shows himself a true citizen of Old Europe by wooing Anita more slowly and romantically, winning her with persuasive words.<sup>58</sup> Johnny has neither the time nor the interest in keeping such old-fashioned conventions when he is on the hunt.

Johnny shows no more hesitation in breaking the law than he does in breaking societal codes. “Listen--I’ve just got to have that violin!”<sup>59</sup> he cries upon seeing Daniello’s beautiful instrument. Though the rest of the play follows Johnny’s pursuit of this instrument, never once does Krenek show him as worrying about the consequences of his theft. In fact, though Johnny must steal the violin, re-steal it from Anita, then steal it yet again from the police who have confiscated it--all clearly immoral and illegal actions by the codes of Old Europe--he is still the undisputed hero of the play. When Anita gives up on rescuing her lover Max from the police, Johnny goes to his rescue, since saving the composer would conveniently also mean recovering the priceless violin Johnny has been trailing. Once he has delivered both violin and man from

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>57</sup> Krenek, 14. Trans.: “Warum willst du denn nicht meine Liebe kennen? Nur einmal, du sollst mich nicht wiedersehen.”

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 16-20. Daniello does not proclaim his love for Anita until three pages after meeting her, while Johnny

Old Europe, the victorious Johnny “strikes up the band” for the opera’s final dance, which brings Europe and in fact all the earth into step with the liberties of the New World.

“All life is nothing but a game,”<sup>60</sup> proclaims the chorus at the opera’s close, and the goal, in this game as in others, is to get ahead. Johnny, clearly, plays the game of life to win, regardless of whether or not his victory requires cheating. But Krenek uses no irony in describing Johnny’s triumph over the forces of Old Europe, instead celebrating it as an appropriate and well-deserved triumph. Daniello, in pursuit of the man who’s stolen his violin, falls beneath a train and dies, representing the death of old European values of sentimentality and romanticism, while Max and Anita both travel to Johnny’s homeland of America to get a new start. Only Johnny remains as he has been throughout the play: free of all social and ethical constraints. From his example, a saving liberty free from the influence of communal standards or interpersonal relationships grows from its American roots and spreads into all of Old Europe.

Brecht puts no such trust in man’s freedom, instead calling down harsh condemnation on the libertine morals promoted by Krenek. The city at the center of his opera, Mahagonny, is the sort of place where Krenek’s Johnny would feel right at home. Mahagonny has no rules,<sup>61</sup> and Brecht probably saw Weimar Germany, with its vices openly for sale in the fanciest hotels,<sup>62</sup> in quite a similar light. While in Krenek’s opera freedom is something inherently found in man, in *Mahagonny* it is a longing unfulfillable within the capitalist system. Mahagonny’s founders are right in determining that man wants only “to do as he pleases,”<sup>63</sup> but though Mahagonny promises to fill this void with the pursuit of endless leisure, it fails to deliver the liberty it

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makes his proclamation within three lines.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 10. Trans.: “Du--ich müssen die Geige haben.”

<sup>60</sup> Krenek, 60. Trans.: “Das ganze Leben ist ein Spiel.”

<sup>61</sup> By the midpoint of the opera, the city’s only rule states: “Don’ts are not permitted here.”

<sup>62</sup> De Jonge, 100-102.

Brecht, 33.

promotes.

As in Krenek's opera, the themes of money and liberty are closely interwoven, but here the tables are turned. For Johnny, freedom is the ability to pursue what one wants—usually money—without social or moral constraints. In Brecht's libretto, though, money is often needed to attain the liberty that all men so desire. Unfortunately wealth, unlike liberty, is not one of mankind's unalienable rights, and so when men must buy their liberty, as in *Mahagonny*, they soon run the risk of both money and freedom abandoning them. In this tension within Brecht's work we run across the fundamental disjunction he sees in modern capitalist societies. They promise the freedom to pursue monetary goals, but in fact money quickly becomes a tyrant, subordinating liberty to the slavery of the endless pursuit of wealth.

The money-freedom question in these operas and in Weimar Germany itself is ultimately one of human nature. Krenek openly welcomes the opportunities for individual freedom that his forward-thinking characters bring to stiff and chilly Europe, just as most liberal Republicans welcomed the democratization and new moral laxity the Weimar Republic had brought to the old imperial order. In Krenek's view of human nature, man awarded with individual liberty will become self-actualized, perhaps even perfected, while Brecht appears skeptical of that very freedom, since he believes humans are so apt to misuse it. While Brecht does not present us with any unified vision of what his ideal society would be, we can clearly see from the example of *Mahagonny* that it would *not* be either capitalist or too focused on individual pleasures. He does not condemn the freedom Krenek treasures so highly, but he also refuses to tie it to the monetary or material well-being that Krenek's characters seek.

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So why the riots at the premiers of Brecht's opera? And why none at the premier of

Krenek's? One answer might be timing. Brecht's opera was premiered three years after Krenek's, following the National Socialists rise to influence. Germany's Nazi party was notorious in its hatred of socialism in any form, and Brecht's critique of capitalism in this work was by no means subtle. Klaus Pringsheim, a contemporary reviewer of the premiere, notes that by the third act viewers were experiencing "the lowest level of hell in our dear capitalist world."<sup>64</sup> Brecht naturally ran into more opposition because of the nature of his work and his own reputation as a socialist. By directing his criticism at the regime in power (a practice that got him into much trouble over the course of his life), he effectively set himself up for confrontation, which eventually forced him into exile. Krenek, on the other hand, was praising the values adopted by Weimar society, so naturally he met with less opposition.

But Krenek was no more accurate in his glorifications of what the modern values of money, love, and freedom might bring than Brecht was in his warnings. Brecht's nightmare land of insatiable greed and sickening permissiveness was replaced within a few years by a regime built on absolute loyalty and the strictest regulations. Krenek's nation of self-actualized individuals entirely free to pursue their desires fell to a state bent on subordinating the individual to its own all-encompassing ambitions. In the end, neither the socialist nor the liberal could see the specter rising from the right and looming behind the riots that night of *Mahagonny's* premiere.

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<sup>64</sup> Klaus Pringsheim, "Mahagonny," *Die Weltbühne* (18 March, 1930), 33.

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SOUTHERN SCHOLARS SENIOR PROJECT

Name: Emily McArthur Date: 14 Sept. '05 Major: English / History / Int'l Studies

SENIOR PROJECT

A significant scholarly project, involving research, writing, or special performance, appropriate to the major in question, is ordinarily completed the senior year. The project is expected to be of sufficiently high quality to warrant a grade of A and to justify public presentation.

Under the guidance of a faculty advisor, the Senior Project should be an original work, should use primary sources when applicable, should have a table of contents and works cited page, should give convincing evidence to support a strong thesis, and should use the methods and writing style appropriate to the discipline.

The completed project, to be turned in in duplicate, must be approved by the Honors Committee in consultation with the student's supervising professor three weeks prior to graduation. Please include the advisor's name on the title page. The 2-3 hours of credit for this project is done as directed study or in a research class.

Keeping in mind the above senior project description, please describe in as much detail as you can the project you will undertake. You may attach a separate sheet if you wish:

I hope to examine two Weimar Republic operas - Kurt Weill's Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny + Ernst Krenek's Jonny Spielt Auf - and write about the included perceptions of modern society + modern man, especially as they are influenced by America + the advent of the Jazz Age. To do this, I will do careful reading of these two librettos as well as other period texts on the issue. I'll also do readings in selected secondary sources to get background.

Signature of faculty advisor [Signature] Expected date of completion 14 Dec '05

Approval to be signed by faculty advisor when completed:

This project has been completed as planned:

This in an "A" project: see attached comments

This project is worth 2-3 hours of credit: yes

Advisor's Final Signature Mark Pesch

Chair, Honors Committee \_\_\_\_\_ Date Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Advisor, please write your final evaluation on the project on the reverse side of this page. Comment on the characteristics that make this "A" quality work.

Critique of Emily McArthur's "Assessments of Modernity in the Operas of Ernst Krenek  
and Bertolt Brecht"

Emily's paper shows an impressive command of historical and literary literature, ranging from original materials to secondary sources. It is fluently written and convincingly argued. Although much of her paper is devoted to literary analysis rather than historical context and analysis, I think this is entirely legitimate given her double major in both history and English.

Her achievement is all the more impressive given that although I am technically her project advisor, I did little more than give her access to relevant volumes from my library.

In my opinion, her paper is outstanding and certainly deserving an "A" grade.

Sincerely,



Mark Peach