

DIE DREIGROSCHENOPER by Opera Zuid Amare in The Hague

A welcome new production of the Bertold Brecht and Kurt Weill favourite known as The Threepenny Opera



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Photo by Joost Milde

In 1928 the long dark shadow of the First World War made Germany a harsh place creating immense suffering and hardship for the German people. The

boots could be heard in the distance but the arts were predominantly left wing communist even. The visual arts were particularly strong at this time but so was drama, Bertold Brecht being preeminent. When he joined forces with composer Kurt Weill their vowed intent was to bring art to the masses. The pair collaborate on their first manifestation of "epic theater" with the *Mahagonny Songspiel* and their *Gebrauchsmusik* in this (and the subsequent *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*) and *Die Dreigroschenoper* they introduced "cheap" music into what was perceived as elitist opera and theater.

Talking about their second collaboration Weill made his intentions clear, "With *Die Dreigroschenoper* we reach a public which either did not know us at all or that was incapable of captivating listeners . . . Opera was founded as an aristocratic . . . If the framework of opera is unable to withstand the impact of the age, the framework must be destroyed . . . In the *Die Dreigroschenoper*, reconstruction is possible insofar as here we had a chance of starting from scratch".

The most famous of the Brecht/Weill pieces, known in English as *The Threepenny Opera*, was based on John Gay's 18th century *The Beggar's Opera* and four poems by François Villon. Brecht's girlfriend at the time, Elisabeth Hauptmann, had dictated the lyrics to Gay and set about translating it - although Brecht took most of the credit as author with Hauptmann mentioned only as translator. On 31st August 1928 *Die Dreigroschenoper* was premiered at Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin. The innovative approach to music, characterized by the concept of *gestic* music with Brecht's efforts to make drama more accessible by emphasizing social over psychological depth influenced theatre worldwide for decades afterwards.

One always thinks of sub-culture in pre-war Berlin as being a bit grey and sombre, taking place in dark basements and drab, ill-lit theatres. Opera Zuid's production is a very different affair, lots of bright colours and the humour brought out whenever possible.

I remember from my childhood Bobby Darin's record of *Mack the Knife* and

involved in the first UK production of *Happy End*, so I have rather a soft spot for Weill and consequently the bar was set quite high.

It must be said that *Die Dreigroschenoper* is not an opera, it is a play with songs. In this production the text was spoken in Dutch but the songs were in their original German. A bit confusing, but there were sur-titles to clarify things. Most of the company were, of course, opera singers acting, but the lead, Macheath – Mr Knives – was played by Maarten Heijmans, an actor who could sing. And he gave a five star performance which I shall remember for some time. He really captured the essence of this roguish but charming London gangster. He looked the part, beautifully and dominated the stage. And although there were fine performances by the ladies, particularly Maarje Rammeloo as a mini-skirted Polly Peachum, it was the men who dominated. Both Huub Claessens as Peachum *père* and Marcel van den Berg as police chief Tiger Brown turned in heavyweight performances, both of which gave Mr Heijmans a run for his money.

Originally scored for twenty-three instruments, lots of doubling-up is often necessary. In the first performances seven musicians managed to play all the parts. The Philzuid orchestra for OperaZuid's *Die Dreigroschenoper*, last night under the baton of Lochan Brown, numbered about twenty and created a completely authentic sound.

Although all the performances were excellent I was less convinced by the production. The décor consisted of four main elements, all of which moved around the stage on wheels to be used when needed. There was a mini stage with fine red curtains, a domestic interior, a low platform onto which things were piled as necessary and a giant metal staircase. The problem was that when they weren't being used they were lurking in the background looking a bit untidy and distracting. The costumes, though they had been assembled from the company's dressing-up box, were not in any real style or consistency. Some looked very much pre-war with lots of almost hall loud checks and stripes which shared the stage with mini-skirts and pastel-coloured thigh boots. That said, this was a fun production so they were quite acceptable and worked well in a non time-specific way.

And although I was not keen on the production visually, it would be hard to argue with the music, singing or acting and the show managed to clear the bar that I set. Very enjoyable. **Michael Hasted, 28th November 2025**

Opera Zuid's tour of *Die Dreigroschenoper* continues until 14th December.

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