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MUSIC

MUSIC; When Cabaret Had an Edge

By BARRY SINGER

KURT WEILL rarely wrote for the notorious Weimar-era cabarets of Berlin. Still, the popular misimpression that identifies him with the Berlin haunts of Christopher Isherwood and Sally Bowles is understandable. Weill's music from this period sounds so deliciously dangerous. Its harsh beauty and dissonant lyricism embody everything we believe Berlin cabaret to have been: sardonic, sophisticated, gorgeously profane.

Everything, unfortunately, that cabaret in New York today largely is not. It is therefore tempting in this, Weill's centennial year (his 100th birthday is Thursday), to look to his musical world for instruction: how can our own less-than-scintillating cabaret scene rediscover the passion, the artfulness and the engagement of Weill's time?

Weill, who died in 1950, was a creature of the theater and the opera house. That is where his exquisite early songs of discontent and disillusion were almost exclusively performed first. The nocturnal society that he and his collaborator, Bertolt Brecht, nevertheless loomed over -- and not infrequently patronized -- was a teeming melange of variety halls, revue emporiums, nightclubs and strip joints. There, contrary to popular belief, the subject that Brecht and Weill so mercilessly addressed -- politics -- was not, in fact, the central focus.

Rather, society was. Topical satire, with nothing sacred, was what Berlin cabaret reveled in. This relentless burlesquing in song of anything we today drearily label "life style" was always of the moment. It was also often bracingly literate as well as musically challenging. Though spiked with plenty of empty-headed pageantry, low humor and naked girls, cabaret in Berlin could be, both lyrically and musically, downright virtuosic.

On an evening in the late 1920's or early 1930's, Berlin night crawlers might have slipped into the celebrated Tingel-Tangel club, run by the composer and lyricist Friedrich Hollander, to be confronted by songs like Hollander's "Munchhausen," with its refrain: "Liar, liar, liar, liar, liar, liar / Truth is hard and tough as nails/ That's why we need fairy tales." (Even in translation these lyrics don't lose their punch.) Or one could enter Kurt Robischek's Cabaret of Comedians (Kabarett der Komiker, popularly dubbed Kadeko), where the music of Mischa Spoliansky reigned, in collaborations with the scriptwriter and lyricist Marcellus Schiffer. Hollander and Spoliansky, along with Berthold Goldschmidt and Hanns Eisler, among others, were composers of immense imagination, nearly as

creative, if not as masterly, as Weill himself. Schiffer, meanwhile, though best known for parodying the mass media, was equally adept at savaging the Berlin equivalent of cool, downtown trendsetters.

"Given a mind that's a sieve/ Makes life so easy to live," he wrote with Spoliansky in "The Smart Set," a sardonic riff on those "neatest, ergo elitist," who sing: "Death and diseases discussed over cheeses,/ The nature of truth mixed with gin and vermouth/ The world's a mess, still we must confess/ That we frankly couldn't care less."

Until Nazi street violence all but banished such expression, lyric-writing social critics like Schiffer and Kurt Tucholsky, Walter Mehring and Erich Kastner were as much the stars of Berlin cabaret as the onstage talents: Trude Hesterberg, Rosa Valetti, Kurt Gerron and even the young Marlene Dietrich. Dietrich, in 1928, had her breakthrough at Kadeco, in a duet with Schiffer's wife, Margo Lion, "When My Best Girlfriend," a lesbianesque ditty for two dissatisfied married ladies on a shopping expedition.

Contrast all of this with the recently announced lineup for New York's newest upscale cabaret, the singer Michael Feinstein's eponymous Feinstein's at the Regency, where a \$60 cover, plus minimums ranging from \$25 to \$50, will bring you Robert Goulet or Linda Eder in March, Mr. Feinstein in April or Glen Campbell in May.

"If you just want to take a walk, all you need is sunlight," Weill wrote in "Berlin im Licht-Song," one of his poems set to music. "But if you want to see the city of Berlin, the sun isn't enough./ To see everything in it properly, you're going to need a few watts / Come on turn on the lights, so we can see what there is to see."

What there is to see in New York today is a cabaret scene dominated by supper clubs, endlessly serving up yesterday's music to deep-pocketed sophisticates. Such an over-refined atmosphere of musty musicale was much despised by Brecht. "Polite, educated people gently bored and pretending to be moved," is how his biographer, Martin Esslin, characterized Brecht's take on it.

"Cabaret in New York is dessert entertainment," the German cabaret star Ute Lemper observed recently. "Audiences here view it as a public ego demonstration of one's private personality. The German tradition of 'kabarett' -- the cabaret performer as activist, as opposed to 'cabaret,' which is just entertainment -- makes people extremely uncomfortable, particularly right after an expensive dinner."

While it is true that New York cabaret never remotely embraced the Berlin model of social engagement, the current scene does seem more frivolously disconnected from the culture at large than ever before. Yes, there are rooms downtown, like Joe's Pub and Judy's and the Duplex, where a kind of cabaret performance occasionally speaks to the moment. But New York cabaret seems overwhelmingly rooted to a wingback chair in the spirit of Mabel Mercer, the definitive cafe chanteuse who almost always sang sitting down. It's not that Ms. Mercer wasn't a divine role model. Nor that the larger culture is not fundamentally crude and threatening. It's just that cabaret today must stand up and engage the here and now if it is to have any meaning, or any future.

No, the missing link is not some sleazy approximation of the studied decadence conjured by Kander

and Ebb's "Cabaret" on Broadway. Classy song recitals of old music in smart rooms by good singers are perfectly nice occasions. Moreover, it could even be argued that poetry slams and stand-up comics function as our contemporary equivalent of Berlin's kabarett.

Still, with corporate Broadway practically closed to an entire generation of young playwrights and composers, wouldn't it be wonderful to see cabaret become a forum for their work? And wouldn't it be glorious if these writers engaged the society that surrounds them with some semblance of their Berlin predecessors' musical and verbal brilliance? And wouldn't it be extraordinary if audiences, young and old, rich and less rich, began patronizing cabarets to hear what these writers had to say because it illuminated their lives?

These are but fantasies. In or out of the supper club, cabaret is hardly a growth industry. And audiences pacified by everything from the Internet to Comedy Central are not likely to stir from their homes for a dose of social satire, however ingeniously conceived. Still one can dream. Or as Hollander, in the Berlin of Weimar, wrote: "Liar, liar, liar, liar, liar, liar/ . . . I'm all through with logical conclusions/ Why should I deny myself illusions?"

Photo: The composer Kurt Weill at his home in New City, N.Y., circa 1946. (Yousuf Karsh/Woodfin Camp and Associates)