

Street Scene: Program Notes from Henry's Perspective

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These program notes are written by the student performing, and are presented by the student in partial fulfillment of the requirements of their course.

Ces notes de programme sont écrites par l'étudiant-interprète et sont présentées en tant que réalisation partielle des critères de leur cours.

Kurt Weill (1900 - 1950) was a German composer who immigrated to the United States and proudly embraced his status as an American citizen. ¹ Weill integrated successfully and readily into the American music scene, with many notable Broadway successes. Weill's 1947 *Street Scene* in particular proved an ambitious and unique venture, bridging the dances and bustling merriment of the Broadway musical with the high drama of grand opera. Weill based the opera closely on the Elmer Rice play. Arguably the true star of the show is apartment #346 where the various residents in the show live, many of them also immigrants. Rice based the building on a real brownstone building at 25 West 65th Street in New York City. ² The stark realism of the plot and characters of *Street Scene* calls to mind the *verismo* operas of Puccini and his contemporaries. Weill wrote to his parents that *Street Scene* was the biggest and most daring work that he had composed for the theatre, utilizing all of his talent, ability and energy. ³ Weill was particularly proud that many viewed *Street Scene* as containing the best music he had ever written. ⁴ Thus it is an enormous pleasure and challenge for me to take part in Opéra McGill's production of this opera so central to Weill's output and to share it with Montréal audiences at the Monument-National.

I have the privilege of performing the role of Henry Davis, a seemingly humble janitor. However, upon further investigation, Henry's role in *Street Scene* reveals fascinating insights. The character is not present in the original Rice play. However, Weill and his librettist, the renowned Langston Hughes, interpolated the African-American Henry Davis into the opera to have an opportunity to write a blues. As research, Hughes and Weill visited Harlem nightclubs to inspire an effective blues idiom. This resulted in the "Marble" aria, the first solo of the show in which Henry sings about preferring stars and halos to his grittier reality of marbles and hats. ⁵ Interestingly, the blues tune returns in a more humorous guise during Mae and Dick's dance number. Henry replaces Mr. Olsen as the Swedish janitor, who in Weill's opera is only known to reside with his wife Mrs. Olsen in the "cool cellar". Rice demanded that his work stay relatively unchanged in adaptation, and so much of Henry's dialogue is verbatim from Mr. Olsen's dialogue, especially in the murder scene of Act 2. ⁶ The opera also provides Henry with a daughter, Grace Davis, though mysteriously, no romantic partner. *Street Scene's* original Henry Davis, baritone Creighton Thompson, drew good reviews, praised as a singing actor doing a "perfect job". ⁷ Other reviews praised the Janitor's "brooding song" and other solos with "ominous orchestrations that accent the basic moods of the drama...serious music enkindled by the excitement of New York". ⁸

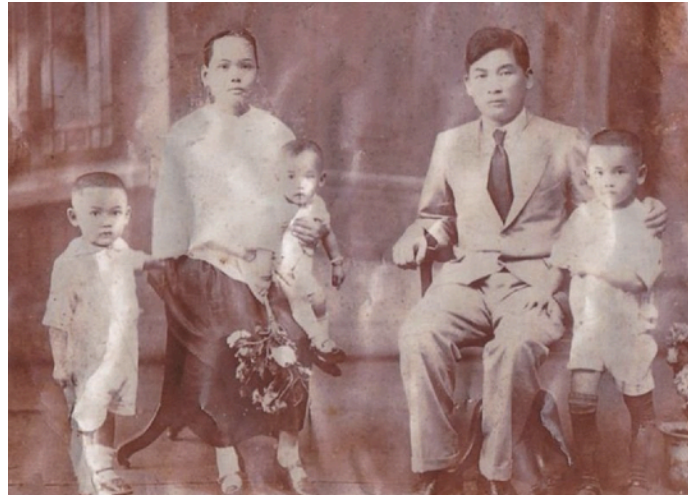
Weill initially envisioned Henry's part as larger. There was originally another solo for the character, "Great Big Sky", sung after everyone else had gone to bed at the end of Act I. ⁹ This cut number is found in the *Unsung Weill* collection and its text about the commonality of humankind underneath a shared sky highlights the creators' concern for intercultural understanding, an ever-relevant topic. ¹⁰ This message was clearly important to Weill as he composed "Great Big Sky" first and called it "the most impressive act-curtain, with a terrific lift at the end". ¹¹ Due to the length of the opera and perhaps racial tensions of the time, Henry's role was reduced and he instead sings a short reprise of his Blues as Rose and Sam bid each other good night at the end of Act I. After all, despite the good intentions of Weill and Hughes, they were creating in a time when Hughes, a noted African-American playwright, could not even stay in the same hotel as the rest of *Street Scene's* company due to racial segregation. ¹²

However, I am a Chinese-Canadian performer playing a character written as African-American. This coincides with current, topical discussion regarding performers not of African descent playing roles such as Verdi's *Otello* or *Aida*. Today's opera companies are eliminating blackface productions - including the Metropolitan Opera's first non-blackface production of *Otello* ¹³. Indeed, other than his Blues, Henry's role does not bear distinct racial musical or written cues. Blues can be seen as an American idiom rather than a racial one: in fact, near the end of the opera, the Caucasian Frank Murrant sings the lament "I loved her too" marked *Moderato (like a blues)* and featuring bluesy alternating thirds. ¹⁴ Reviewers have said that Weill composed Henry's "Marble" solo in a specifically African-American idiom, yet it could be sung by another nationality without seeming unnatural or strange. ¹⁵

Eliminating blackface gives me the opportunity to portray an Asian-American immigrant Henry Davis. My mother is certainly one of my big inspirations for Henry's aspirational solo "I've got a marble and a star". She had a similar experience of immigrant perseverance. She immigrated to North America with my father, having no relevant qualifications except a Chinese literature degree. She worked as a cashier, washing dishes, and binding books at a factory in Canada and the US while studying for a second higher education degree, retraining at Purdue as an accountant. Now, she works for the Canadian government as a Financial Officer. As director Francesca Zambello astutely remarked in an interview while directing a 1994 Houston Grand Opera production of *Street Scene*: "They were all in this melting pot, or mosaic, depending on your viewpoint. And we still are today - it's just that the cast of characters has changed. The 'outsiders' who populate *Street Scene* - Irish, Jews, Swedes, Germans, Italians - are the people we now consider 'Americans'. This drama could play itself out again and it does, if you read the papers - one block away from here, except with Russian emigrés, Latino people, Asians. When you go to Brighton Beach or Spanish Harlem or Chinatown you enter into the same kind of 'street scene' ". ¹⁶

Asian-American representation in Western arts such as opera is a relatively new conversation, though there is exciting, recent work such as the COC's race-conscious though controversial endeavours with production consultant Richard Lee for a recent production of Puccini's Chinese *Turandot*. ¹⁷ However, there were certainly far fewer Asian-Americans in 1946 than today, let alone the opera's 1929 prewar setting, which was chosen in order to tone down anti-Semitic comments. ¹⁸ However, in the 1850s, many Chinese immigrants came to America during the Californian Gold Rush as well as

to work agricultural and factory jobs. Their success drew anti-Chinese resentment, leading to regrettable measures including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, not repealed until World War II. ¹⁹ The question of Henry's daughter Grace is also fascinating as her mother is absent from the opera. Perhaps she was the daughter of an intercultural relationship such as that of Sam and Rose. Sam's sister Shirley tellingly remarks that "you can't mix oil and water" regarding Jewish Sam's fondness for the Irish-Catholic Rose, which some have likened to the culture clash of the interracial relationship of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. ²⁰ It is certainly hair-raising to think of the consequences of Henry having an interracial relationship - illegal and punishable by prison at the time. The law remained so until the monumental *Loving v. Virginia* case of 1967, which began to break down America's laws against interracial marriage. ²¹ I hope that insights into my re-imagined portrayal of Henry Davis provide greater insight into the strikingly forward-thinking and courageous work of Weill and Hughes in their creation of *Street Scene*. Certainly, delving into its fascinatingly complex production history demonstrates *Street Scene's* continuing and critical importance to today's audiences and societal issues.



Samuel Lowe and Ho Swee Yin with their sons Chow Woo, Chow Kong, and Chow Ying in 1929. Samuel also had children of Chinese-Caribbean descent from previous relationships in the West. ²²

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Endnotes

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- ² Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, 4.
- ³ Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, 12.
- ⁴ Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, 14.
- ⁵ Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, 3.
- ⁶ Elmer Rice, *Street Scene*, Samuel French (New York, 1929), 179.
- ⁷ Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, 23.
- ⁸ Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, 24.
- ⁹ Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, 9.
- ¹⁰ Kurt Weill, *Unsung Weill: 22 Songs Cut from Broadway Shows and Hollywood Films*, ed. Elmar Juchem, European American Music Corp. (Miami, 2002), 9-12.
- ¹¹ Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, 10.
- ¹² Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, iv.
- ¹³ Michael Cooper, 'An "Otello" Without Blackface Highlights an Enduring Tradition in Opera', *The New York Times*, 17 September 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/arts/music/an-otello-without-the-blackface-nods-to-modern-tastes.html>.
- ¹⁴ Kurt Weill and Langston Hughes, *Street Scene: An American Opera* (New York: Chappell and Co., Inc., 1948), 253.
- ¹⁵ Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, 34, 48.
- ¹⁶ Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, 54.
- ¹⁷ John Nyman, 'COC Turandot — Making People out of Porcelain', *Opera Canada*, 1 October 2019, <https://operacanada.ca/coc-turandot-review-2019/>.
- ¹⁸ Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, v.
- ¹⁹ Office of the Historian, 'Chinese Immigration and the Chinese Exclusion Acts', *United States Department of State*, accessed 1 January 2020, <https://operacanada.ca/coc-turandot-review-2019/>.
- ²⁰ Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, 67.
- ²¹ Steve Gosset, 'The Lovings: A Couple That Changed History', *American Civil Liberties Union*, 9 February 2012, <https://www.aclu.org/blog/racial-justice/loving-couple-changed-history>.
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