

Date du récital/Date of recital: *January 31, February 1*

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Program Notes on Rose in Kurt Weill's *Street Scene*

Street Scene made its debut at the Adelphi Theater in New York City in 1947 and was quickly regarded as one of the best American musical pieces in the repertoire. Musical Digest in a review stated that "American Opera has at last been realized" and the Chicago Daily News compared it to another American classic: "*Street Scene* is as much an American opera as *Porgy and Bess*, and I don't hesitate in the least to rank it just as high as the Gershwin classic" (Robinson). The score embodies Weill's highly regarded compositional style: a mixture between American Broadway, German operetta, and opera. The lyrics are by Langston Hughes, in direct collaboration with Elmer Rice, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Street Scene*. The story narrates the difficulties and realities of living in the tenement district of New York, the various dynamics of working immigrants, and ultimately the tragedy of an abusive relationship.

Regarding the score, *Street Scene*'s classification lives somewhere in between opera and musical theater, with Broadway numbers and big chorus ensembles to highly chromatic and

passionate operatic duets. In his notes for the original cast recording, Weill expressed that his dream was to create a great American opera and that he “discovered that a vast, unexploited field lay between grand opera and musical comedy, although the ground was already well prepared.” (Weill, “Two Dreams Come True”). The fully orchestrated score is through-composed, which muddies the traditional sense of structure for an opera or a musical. This was unusual for musicals at the time since musicals were simple and usually supported by piano accompaniment. However, Weill was intentional in his collaboration with librettist Langston Hughes and author Elmer Rice that he wanted dialogue to be spoken over orchestration instead of writing standard operatic recitative, as he said “I address myself to Americans and I don’t think they want ‘Do you want another cup of coffee?’ to be sung” (Kowalke, 5). Weill came from a classical training background in Berlin, having studied with acclaimed figures such as Engelbert Humperdinck, Freidrich Koch, and Rudolf Krasselt. Weill’s high level of training gives his musical theater scores a deep richness, furthermore skillfully blending in tunes and colors of the characters to create approachable, even hummable melodies. In the *Street Scene* score there are many moments that have a jazz influenced sound, which matches the feeling of New York in the early 1940s.

Inspired by Elmer Rice’s Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Street Scene*, Weill undoubtedly resonated with the experience of immigrants in the United States. The play and score are both unique in the time spent getting to know the supporting characters and their experiences as immigrants living in the slums of New York. The famous, often excerpted “Ice Cream Sextet” is a classic Broadway number that explores the experiences of each of the immigrant characters on the hot streets of New York as they sing about the simple pleasures of ice cream on a sweltering

day. However, the story is not always as uplifting and tuneful. As the opera progresses, the plot twists into a heart wrenching story of trust, love, and the power of insecurities. Langston Hughes' lyrics illustrate the pain and confusion for the two leading ladies of *Street Scene*: Anna Maurant, the mother of the Maurant family who is unhappy in her marriage and looking for solace, and Rose Maurant, Anna's daughter who feels tormented by the nasty rumors of her mother's potential infidelity. These two women are foiled by the dark, heavy, abusive presence of Frank Maurant, husband of Anna and father to Rose. With both dialogue and highly dramatic arias and trios, Weill and Hughes depict the circular, repetitive quality of life as the opera starts exactly as it began.

Rose Maurant is often a source of light both in text and musical themes throughout the show, heard in her young and lively eighth note theme played by the flute in many of her entrances. Her first entrance highlights the unfortunate power dynamic that she's stuck in with her boss, Mr. Easter. He offers her a more glamorous lifestyle, outside of the ruins of her current situation, by offering her a flashy career on Broadway in exchange for her love (despite the fact that he is married). Rose's kindness matched with her wit and clear-headedness is shown in her refusal of his offer without upsetting him. Her complicated relationship with love, a direct symptom of her parents' tumultuous marriage, unfolds as she sings her aria, "What good would the moon be?". The lyrics illustrate her intelligence as she casts away ideas of expensive, glamorous love and instead asks for sincerity and safety in her love. There is a heavy jazz influence in this aria with blue notes and swinging rhythms, which suggests that Rose is modern and connected to the American ideals.

Following the aria, she sings with Sam Kaplan, her love interest in the opera. Sam, a young law student who is in love with Rose, is deeply upset about their living situation and the constant gossiping. Rose comforts him by reminding him of an earlier moment they shared together reciting Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed". Her kindness is underscored in the sweetness and comforting quality of her theme (the same delicate eighth note pattern that we hear at the beginning of her aria as well) before she begins to sing. Though Rose is sweet and kind to Sam, it becomes clear that her and Sam do not share the same type of love for each other. He is devoted to her and wants to run away with her, but Rose simply relishes in the idea of leaving New York with her friend, Sam. He is a confidant for her and she feels safe with him, but the dialogue and lyrics suggest that she doesn't allow herself to get swept up in the romantic ideal of running away together.

Rose's complicated ideas of love are understood more in the second act, as she talks with both her mother and father (first separately, then together in a heart wrenching trio) about their love and why neither of them feel themselves in their relationship anymore. This heartbreak reaches its pinnacle towards the end of the act when Rose has to confront her father, who just murdered her mother in a fit of rage and jealousy, and says "You say you loved her too, but now she's dead. She was my mother, why did you kill her?".

Ultimately, Rose finds clarity in this tragic event as she decides to take her life into her own hands and leave New York. She comes to the realization that loving and belonging are not the same, which is an impressively modern idea for the 1940s. Sam is excited by the idea of leaving New York and says that they belong to each other, but she doesn't allow him to join her. Weill sets up this moment with space and allows Rose to clearly express herself with a

pianissimo dynamic that builds to a forte marked dolente (sore) and rests throughout the phrase to give it an intimate and speech like delivery. Underneath the vocal line, Weill writes horn and bassoon in a dull tremolo to highlight the dramatic relevance and to let the listener focus solely on the text. She states her truth, and perhaps the greatest truth in the entire show, in her final duet with Sam when she sings “Look at my father, my poor mother, If she had belonged to herself, If he had belonged to himself, It never would have happened. And that’s why, even though my heart breaks, I can’t belong to you, Or have you belong to me.”

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