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Post-Classical Ensemble, Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, Maryland

By George Loomis

Musical reactions to Pearl Harbor by two émigré composers formed the core of a concert on Sunday by the Washington DC-based Post-Classical Ensemble. Kurt Weill's *Four Walt Whitman Songs*, rare enough even with the usual piano accompaniment, were given their US premiere in the composer's orchestral version. The choice of Whitman epitomised the German-born Weill's embrace of all things American, which, in musical terms, generally meant Broadway. Its idiom is not absent here, yet the music often sounds like what Weill might have composed had he traversed more narrowly a classical path enriched by Americana.

Weill's setting of the famous "O Captain! My Captain!" personalises the loss of President Lincoln, lamented by Whitman with a simple folksong-like melody of the sort any number of classical composers might have worked into a piece. And Weill's compelling orchestration injects new descriptive elements, most obviously when a snare drum underpins "Beat! Beat! Drums!". The songs proved to lie rather low for tenor Kenneth Gayle, whose singing could have been more outgoing.

The Viennese Arnold Schoenberg clung, by contrast, to Germanic ways; nor did his music undergo comparable transformation. Yet his fascinating *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte*, op 41, to Lord Byron's text, emerged as no less an exercise in US patriotism. Byron's words are cryptic, yet in Schoenberg's piece there is no mistaking the parallel between Napoleon and Hitler or the timeliness of Byron's homage to George Washington. It takes some doing to wind up a 12-tone piece in E flat, but that's just how Schoenberg underscores the Washington reference, and very moving the effect proves to be. The baritone Chris Pedro Trakas ably projected the *Sprechstimme* text, with teeming instrumental support coming from the pianist Naoko Takao and the Left Bank String Quartet.

Also included were pre-emigration composer snapshots. Weill's *Little Threepenny Music* is a meticulous recycling, predominantly for winds, of tunes from *The Threepenny Opera*, whose acerbic, Brechtian musical style is virtually excluded from the *Whitman Songs*. Some wind solos could have taken a more defiant tone, but otherwise the performance under the conductor Angel Gil-Ordóñez had verve. Schoenberg's "Three Piano Pieces", op 11, an early work that led us down the path of atonality, were played with conviction and lyricism by Takao.

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