



Blitzstein, Marc (1905-1964)

by Robert Kellerman

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

American composer Marc Blitzstein composed in a variety of forms, but is best known today for his opera scores, especially *The Cradle Will Rock* (1936). Although none of his operas is in the standard repertory or often performed, he had a major influence on other composers who aspired to blend classical and popular forms, especially Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim.

Blitzstein was born in Philadelphia on March 2, 1905 into an affluent Jewish banking family. He began playing piano at the age of three and began composing when he was seven. He attended the University of Pennsylvania briefly. He studied privately in New York City, enrolled in the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia upon its founding in 1924, and then studied with Arnold Schoenberg in Berlin and Nadia Boulanger in Paris.

Upon returning to the United States, he performed his own *Piano Sonata* (1927) in New York in 1928. He began work as a music critic for *Modern Music* at this time, and eventually wrote for *Musical Quarterly* and *New Masses* as well.

Although he originally followed the "art for art's sake" doctrine prevalent in America, writing intellectually challenging music for a select elite, as he adopted more radical political positions (and joined the Communist Party) he came to espouse the doctrines of Kurt Weill, Bertolt Brecht, and Hanns Eisler, who were responsible for creating socially conscious, popular theater in Germany.

Blitzstein thus began to embrace the philosophy of "music for the people," the immediate result of which was the opera *The Cradle Will Rock* (1936), a politically charged work about labor unionism.

The first production was directed by Orson Welles at the Mary Elliott Theater in New York and produced by John Houseman under the auspices of the Federal Theater Project (FTP). Its legendary first performance was a sensation, in part because the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which administered the FTP, was under attack by the U.S. government for its pro-labor stance. The WPA had its budget cut just before the premiere of the opera. The show went on without orchestra, sets, costumes, lights, or union actors, staged in a theater that had been procured the evening of the performance.

The success (and notoriety) of the impromptu production made Blitzstein famous as a leading exponent of politically committed musical theater. Leonard Bernstein, who saw a 1938 production of the opera on Broadway, produced it at Harvard and became a friend and protégé of the composer.

Other important Blitzstein works include his *Symphony: The Airborne* (1946), written while the composer was stationed in Great Britain during World War II and first performed in New York under the baton of Leonard Bernstein; his ambitious opera *Regina* (1949), based on Lillian Hellmann's play *The Little Foxes*; an influential and altogether successful adaptation and translation of Weill and Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (1952); and the opera *Juno* (1959), based on Sean O'Casey's play *Juno and the Paycock*.

Although necessarily publicly closeted, Blitzstein was honest about his homosexuality with his friends and colleagues. However, in 1933, he married critic and writer Eva Goldbeck (1901-1936), who seems to have been aware of his homosexuality; nevertheless, they had a deep relationship until her death three years later.

Subsequently, his erotic life seems to have been exclusively homosexual. His homosexuality probably inspired the sympathy for outsiders that motivated his political activism.

Blitzstein's death came in Martinique where he was wintering in 1963. He apparently made sexual advances to three Portuguese sailors whom he had picked up. What exactly happened next is unclear, but Blitzstein was robbed, beaten, and stripped. Found the next morning, he was immediately taken to a hospital where he died of internal bleeding on January 22, 1964.

Although interest in Blitzstein and his work declined in the 1960s and 1970s, more recently he has come to be recognized as a significant figure in the history of American musical theater. Renewed attention to Blitzstein has also resulted from Tim Robbins' film *Cradle Will Rock* (1999), which took as its subject the creation of *The Cradle Will Rock*.

Bibliography

Burton, Peter. "Blitzstein, Marc." *Gay and Lesbian Biography*. Michael J. Tyrkus, ed. Detroit: St. James Press, 1997. 75-77.

Gordon, Eric A. *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.

Kushner, David Z. "Blitzstein, Marc." *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Stanley Satie, ed. 2nd ed. 29 vols. London: Macmillan, 2001. 3:702-704.

The Marc Blitzstein Web Site. www.marcblitzstein.com.

About the Author

Robert Kellerman holds a doctorate in English literature from Michigan State University.