

Paper presented at “Mobility in American Culture” Conference
June 20-22, 2002
University of Bologna

Andante Sostenuto: Chromatic Mobility in Kurt Weill’s and Bertolt Brecht’s *The Seven*

Deadly Sins

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In *The Seven Deadly Sins*, Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht present, in musical form, a cultural critique of America and the cult of the American Dream. The musical and geographical mobility through the movement of the two doppelganger sister protagonists (one via her voice; one via her body) as they work to achieve “success” reveals a fundamental irony: although the sisters eventually attain the American Dream, they must first endure an American Nightmare that goes along with it—losing their integrity, one sin at a time. “This orphaned work has exploded into extraordinary prominence in the past thirty years as recent generations find themselves responding anew to the rise of conservative right-wing ideology with its hypocritical emphasis on ‘family values’ and a pernicious bourgeois-morality that defines self-interest as its ultimate justification. Surrounded as we are by cartoons, feel-good movies and massive glorifications of rape and violence, we begin to sense the tyranny of ‘happiness’ ...that drives Anna I, in her relentless upward mobility, towards the nirvana of yuppie pleasure and ultimate isolation” (Sellars, n.p.).

“When he landed in New York on September 10, 1935, Kurt Weill knew more about America than America knew about him. What he ‘knew’ was a mixture of fact and fiction, the characteristic bundle of assorted admirations, envies and suspicions carried in their minds by Europeans who had never been there. The unimaginable size of the place, with its limitless

possibilities for expansion and self-advancement, and thus for the acquisition and exercise of power, held the European mind in thrall.... Even Brecht could not escape the fascination of the place, with its skyscrapers, its king-size automobiles and technological wonders, its dazzling movies and its vibrant jazz. The Fords, the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts may stand for America but so also do Charlie Chaplin and Louis Armstrong” (Taylor, 216). But the story of the two American Annas was born in 1933 when both Weill and Brecht were still in Europe. Though Weill wouldn’t become an American citizen until 1943, he was infatuated by the sounds of the American music he had collected on vinyl. In a way Weill belongs to that school of American composers that Virgil Thompson speaks about in his 1945 article “On Being American” for the New York *Herald Tribune* where he writes that American music “is not limited to the native-born or to the German-trained or to the French-influenced or to the self-taught or to the New York-resident or to the California-bred. It is in the air and belongs to us all.... And any Americanism worth bothering about is everybody’s property anyway” (504).

It was Weill’s conception to have the split personality of the characters be conveyed by a dancer and a singer and it was Brecht’s text which sent these two characters traveling through America. “Brecht being Brecht, and the Marxist view of society being what it is, the apparent meaning of the parable is stood on its alienated head: the allegory is presented not as thesis but as dialectical antithesis, and to make his message clear, Brecht extended the title of the work to [*The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petit-Bourgeoisie*]. For Sloth, Pride and the rest are, in themselves, not vices but virtues—they are vices only to the petit-bourgeois mentality which has subjected itself to a pattern of values which rests solely on venality. Everything, and everybody, has its price, and it is wrong to refuse to do something for which payment has been offered. Refusal amounts to offence against the established order; in fact, by being natural...one

constitutes a threat to this order.... In a society founded on capitalist exploitation one cannot survive and be good at the same time” (Taylor, 199).

Brecht’s “working materials included the Luther Bible, newspaper stories, and an imaginary America whose economic miracles and personal freedoms he depicted, from three thousand miles away, with devastating accuracy” (Sellars, n.p.). “Randolph Goodman has noted that Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* may have provided some of the material for [*The Seven Deadly Sins*]. This novel appeared in Berlin in 1927, and shortly thereafter Erwin Piscator and Lena Goldschmidt began adapting it for the stage. At that time Brecht was a member of Piscator’s dramaturgical collective...and both he and Weill surely knew of the *American Tragedy* project.... One can also speculate that both Brecht and Weill had seen von Sternberg’s film version of the novel, which was a great hit throughout Europe.... Brecht also incorporated into [this work] his fascination with large cities and their effect on human behavior.... [T]he cities lure Anna with their promises of economic potential, while the human conditions in each both feed and frustrate her quest for ‘success’—until...she ‘learns’ to give in to metropolitan morality. The lure of the cities also provides a structural device which keeps Anna and Weill’s music on the move, while Brecht’s texts proffer static recapitulations of moral lessons.” (Shull, 212-214).

Weill described *The Seven Deadly Sins* as a “spectacle in nine scenes” (Taylor, 198) and this spectacle begins with a Prologue where we are introduced to the two Annas as they prepare to seek fame and fortune by traveling to cities throughout America. During their travels the two sisters’ personalities will clash seven times in seven different cities across the country: each clash represents a dilemma brought on by an encounter with one of the seven deadly sins. Anna I, the more verbal sister, tells us that their motivation for trekking across the country is to make money.

“My sister and I left Louisiana/ Where the moon on the Mississippi is a-shining ever/
Like you’ve heard in the songs about Dixie./ We look forward to our home-coming—/And the
sooner the better./ It’s a month already since we started/ For the great big cities/ Where you go to
make money./ In seven years our fortune will be made/ And then we can go back.../ Our mom
and dad and both our brothers wait in old Louisiana/ And we’ll send them all our money as soon
as we make it/ For all the money’s got to go to build a little home/ Down by the Mississippi in
Louisiana.”

She continues by describing the relationship between herself and her sister. “She’s the
one with the looks, I’m realistic;/ She’s just a little mad, my head is on straight./ We’re really
one divided being,/ Even though you see two of us./ Both of us are named Anna./ Together
we’ve a single past, a single future,/ one heart and one savings account;/ and we only do what is
best for each other. Right, Anna?/ Right, Anna.” Anna I presents her account of the sisters’ dual
nature, purpose and philosophy with great conviction. “In the prologue Anna I gives us the story
that she wants us to believe and that she is trying to convince herself is true.... Anna I is verbal,
‘practical,’ as she lets us know, the realist, the pragmatist and the control-freak” (Sellars, n.p.).
Anna II, described by her sister as “beautiful” but “somewhat mad,” is relatively silent. She
accompanies Anna I through their adventures communicating her version of the story through
her dance movements. She “speaks silently through actions, thoughts, longings and emotions”
(Sellars, n.p.). The few times we do get to hear Anna II speak she echoes her agreement with
Anna I’s inquiry, “Right, Anna?/ Right, Anna.”

Over the next seven years they will meet all sorts of interesting people and encounter a
multitude of different situations, in order to live their American dream of early retirement in their

newly constructed Louisiana home where “the moon forever shines on the Mississippi, just like you always hear in the songs of Dixie.”

Brecht left the interpretive interludes open to the discretion of the director. Using that as my disclaimer, I will now attempt to update *The Seven Deadly Sins* to the 21st century where irony and humor I hope still exist—even in these post-postmodern times. Once again, I remind you that what you are about to read is my expressive modernization of Brecht’s and Weill’s narrative movement. Only the details have been changed. The cities, situations, and sins remain the same. Let’s begin:

Anna and Anna are leaving their slothful ways behind in Louisiana, to begin their “Dance Across America” tour. They decide to relocate to Memphis where Anna gets employed as a lap dancer in the VA VA VOOM club. She decides to educate her customers about the fine art of dancing. She initiates a pre-show performance art, lecture/discussion format into her dance routine. The patrons meanwhile instruct her to “strut her stuff” and “shake her booty.” Anna must swallow her pride and “take it off,” or “take a hike.”

She takes the hint and moves to Los Angeles and gets a starring role in a film. Her anger gets out of control not because of the congested traffic or the smog but because, as an animal rights advocate, she disdains the film industry’s inhumane treatment of animals. When she reads that the script calls for her to step on and squish an ant, her anger turns into rage and she physically attacks the director, gets fired and must now mobilize herself to move all the way across the country to Philadelphia where she has signed a contract to perform as the lead “fly girl” in a Philly cheese steak hip-hop video promo. Her solo “pop and lock” routine is contingent on her keeping her weight down and not gaining an ounce. Starvation induces hunger pains and hallucinations about the “down home Cajun cooking” she enjoyed in Louisiana. Anna pleads

with Anna to stop the binging and purging. But even with the help of her sister, her family, Fen-Phen, and “Jenny Craig,” she gains weight. The aroma wafting in from across the street beckons. The dancing queen abdicates her throne to the refrain: Long live the Burger King.

Now in Boston, *The Young and The Restless* Anna finds herself trapped in a real life soap opera. She is involved with two men—Edwardo and Fernando. Edwardo loves Anna but Anna does not love Edwardo. Anna loves Fernando but Fernando does not love Anna. Edwardo is very rich and is constantly showering Anna with money and expensive jewelry. Anna keeps these gifts and gives them to Fernando so that he will not leave her. Anna hates that Anna is two timing Edwardo and tells Anna to stop seeing Fernando. *The Bold* Anna reminds *The Beautiful* Anna that, “To love for love’s sake is lust.”

Their greed for fame and fortune become the motivation for their move to Baltimore, where they immediately get thrust into a media frenzy. CNN and MSNBC have sent their teams to cover the breaking news. Scandalous headlines appear in newspapers all over the country. The paparazzi follow them everywhere. An *Entertainment Tonight* exclusive links Anna with the suicide deaths of at least a dozen men. The spotlight focuses on her cold, mean and mercenary ways. She can’t take the heat and so she decides to move across the country back to California.

This time their destination is San Francisco where Anna is overcome with envy at having had to relinquish her self esteem and her desires, her identity and her integrity to emerge as a slave of her own compelling ambitions.

It’s now time for them to go home. Anna tries to motivate Anna to get moving. In desperation Anna begins to sing a motivational anthem and from Anna’s mouth to Anna’s ears the two of them march back home to Louisiana to the rallying cry, “Who ever gains victory over oneself also gains the reward.”

That's the end of my expressive modernization of the mobility narrative. However, their geographical journey is only half of their story. "To the nine sections of the dramatic text Weill wrote a line-by-line music, now sentimental, now sardonic, in the alienated manner the world has come to recognize as Brecht-Weill.... The music of the *Seven Deadly Sins* is, despite its mocking, parodistic elements, less abrasive, less redolent of the atmosphere of the revue and cabaret world...[and] edges forward to shift the centre of musical gravity...from Berlin to Broadway...." Even American composer Virgil Thompson recognized the particular aroma of American musical style in Weill's music when he wrote, "It smells of Hollywood" (Taylor, 200).

Anna's musical escapades occur between the Prologue and the Epilogue. Framed by these two fixed points Anna traverses a wide variety of musical terrains ranging from Bach chorales, and cabaret music, to waltzes, foxtrots, tangos, and marches where "consistently incorporated jazz elements and contemporary dance rhythms are easily recognizable throughout" (Scher, 237).

Meanwhile the family musically maneuvers Anna onward by their incessant and berating reminders to send them more money. "Weill, in a stroke of brilliance, created a quartet of male voices to represent the family back home as they greedily follow the news of the girls' sluttish progress from one city to another" (Taylor, 200). On top of all this the mother's booming voice interjects her pious anxieties in *basso profundo*.

The music assigns a tempo for each encounter with a deadly sin. *Andante sostenuto* is used for both the Prologue and the Epilogue. This is ironic in that *Andante* dictates that the Annas should move at a moderate pace but the *sostenuto* indicates that they should hold or stay in the same place. Of course this tempo marking also reflects the aforementioned structural device which keeps Anna and her music moving while her text proffers static moral lessons.

However, most of the musical segments are energized by the perpetual motion sound of the orchestra in an attempt to keep the Annas moving. Sloth, the first deadly sin the sisters' encounter, with its tempo marking *Allegro Vivace* (fast and lively) is accompanied by frantic, tarantella-esque music while Anna's family quartet vigorously complains about her laziness.

The delicate lilting sound of an artistic waltz reflects Anna's pride in her requisite pre-show lecture. However when her uneducated audience disapproves of her dance style by their whistles and catcalls the waltz becomes turbulent reflecting a shift of emotion and Anna's own annoyance.

Anger resulting from the 'ant incident' is reflected in the *Molto Agitato* tempo. The family is furious at Anna for not sending them more money and their fury is accompanied by a "dazzling array of popular dances and cheap movie music that without warning explodes into music of shocking violence and power" (Sellars, n.p.). Even the wrath of the gong is sounded to emphasize the family's concern as they implore the Lord to watch over their Anna.

Gluttony's potential for heaviness is accompanied by the *Largo* movement of the music. The weight is significantly reduced, however, by the loss of the orchestral accompaniment while the family sings a gospel style *a cappella* hymn. Eventually guitar strums begin to add ounces and significantly more weight is gained as the orchestra briefly reaches full capacity. The lean cuisine of guitar arpeggios will resume and eventually the *a cappella* menu returns. But Anna's appetite for food grows into a lustful affair with Fernando and Edwardo.

Her lust builds rapidly. The soft rumblings of the orchestra explode with the entrance of the trumpet before turning into the lusty strains of a tango. Avarice is greedily accented with frantic, rapid, "hit and run" orchestration as it complements the *Allegro Giusto* tempo of the out of control Baltimore paparazzi.

Envy snarls and smolders within the serpentine movement of the music to illustrate Anna's overall contempt for humanity. Her agony becomes unbearable and she lashes out a litany of her former escapades and how she has suffered at the expense of others. Anna II wants to give in to envy but Anna I breaks into a fire and brimstone anthem extolling the virtues both Annas possess motivating the sisters to march back towards their Louisiana home. They resume the *Allegro* walking tempo of the Prologue in order to enter the Epilogue and invoke the hold of the *sostenuto* to end their odyssey.

In music there is nothing more mobilizing than dissonance. Embedded with the sound of tension, it innately motivates us towards finding a resolution—stability provided by the sound of consonance. Traditionally the beginning sounds of a musical composition function to establish a geographical center, a core tonality, a home key. These initial sounds provide the audible home base from which the rest of the music determinately deviates, traversing space and time by means of modulation (movement from one key to another) to various other tonalities and dissonances before returning to the familiar home tonality at the end of the musical piece. The musical mobility of *The Seven Deadly Sins* capitalizes on this traditional musical paradigm and immediately mobilizes itself against that tradition as it propels the two Annas into motion.

The first musical sounds we hear in *The Seven Deadly Sins* are minor. The significance of minor sounds is that, in and of themselves, they are inherently precarious, volatile and destabilizing. Their ominous presence foreshadows that the American adventure the two Annas are about to embark upon will not necessarily be happy. Further, these minor sounds do not even presume to establish a comforting grounding in an auditory home. Instead, the musical movement of the Prologue produces an atmosphere of audible instability where the sense of

tonality dissolves before our ears into a multitude of other keys much in the same way that Anna's personality dissolves into two identities functioning within one human mind. As Anna wanders from one end of America to the other, the music incessantly wanders through a maze of tonalities from one end of the musical spectrum to the other—audibly emulating the geographical and psychological wanderings of the two Annas.

But even more danger lurks in Anna's soundscape. In the musical land of the "semitonal sideslip," when Anna makes a move a half tone in a downward direction she finds herself in a distantly remote harmonic environment. "One small step" for Anna is "a giant leap" in musical distance. While Weill in no way abandons traditional harmonic or compositional principles, he does, instead, manipulate the traditional musical principles in order to produce his own individual harmonic vocabulary, capitalizing on one particularly mobilizing sound for Anna—the tri-tone. Reminiscent of the demonic sounds that pursued great blues artists like Robert Johnson, the tri-tone is the sound of an uncanny, irritating, restless spirit. In fact it is the sound of the "devil in music." To escape from this demonic environment Anna moves up and down the musical scale searching for the stable chords whose harmonious environment she seeks. Within the first few seconds of the music in the Prologue, Weill has been able to establish an atmosphere of audible instability. The music has a tension which results from his unusual use of harmonies. The individual chords he uses are surprisingly stable or consonant but when they are grouped together to form a harmonic progression the resulting harmonies sound strange and unresolved. The characteristic Weill Chord (a minor chord with an added major sixth) is frequently used to produce the harmonic tension from which Anna tries to escape. The succeeding sections continue to make use of remote harmonic relationships thereby obscuring any sense of a stable tonality (Kemp, 13-15). The effect elicited is similar to a jazz improvisation

whereby the soloist leaves the security of the established harmonic environment and mobilizes the music into distant melodic and rhythmic excursions temporarily obscuring while simultaneously journeying towards the pre-established tonal environment.

Much in the same way that Anna's personality dissolves into two identities functioning from within one human mind, our sense of tonality begins to dissolve before our ears into a multitude of different keys and his divergent harmonies invite even more chromatic alterations. Weill's music dramatizes the psychological division of Anna's character by accompanying many of her geographical excursions through bitonal harmonic relationships—a kind of aural hallucination where two distinct tonalities exist simultaneously within the music. Though she survives her aural hallucinations and moves on to her next adventure, Weill's preference for composing in the minor mode continues to produce the unstable environment in which Anna finds herself. Even the few times that Weill's music strives towards the major mode the harmonies are tinted with minor shadings. Unfortunately for Anna, even the stable and consonant chords she encounters conspire against her in unpredictable movements: thus compelling her through a myriad of stranger and more remote musical territories.

Inevitably her beginning is her end and her end is her beginning. In the Prologue immediately before Anna I describes the differences between herself and her sister, the music shifts its course. The prevailing dotted rhythm pattern heard at the beginning and continually interjected during Anna I's narration is suddenly replaced with a sensuous musical theme which works to reinforce Anna II's affinity towards her socially prohibitive behavior—the seductive impetus for their mobilization. It is the final theme heard in the Prologue and it ends with the sound of an open fifth interval instead of a chord. An interval embodies only the two outer notes of a chord. With the desired middle note missing the chord does not exist and without the chord

to help Anna achieve either a happy or sad ending, the music is reduced into traveling through vacuous auditory space in search of its identity. The Epilogue repeats the same sensuous musical theme heard in the Prologue. But instead of the ambiguous ending of the Prologue, the Epilogue ends on the more positive and happy sound of a major chord.

As Anna crisscrosses the country in search of her American dream—indulging in “personal freedoms” and hoping for “economic miracles”—she wades her way through the ambivalent, destabilizing, constantly shifting tonalities, the bimodalities, the anxious, agitated and irregular rhythms working in consort to communicate how stressful life is for the two upwardly mobile Annas on their restless roam throughout the musical landscape. Driven into the dark forces of the minor mode while defying the auditory obstacles of remote harmonic relationships which are placed in her way, she survives the “semitonal sideslip” yet always wonders why she “still hasn’t found what she’s looking for.”

In search of happiness Anna has traveled approximately 9,349 miles. The irony of her dilemma (in the Brecht/Weill critique of American culture) becomes apparent when at the end of her journey the music reveals that the shortest distance to happiness is the movement of a half-step up the musical ladder to the sound of a major chord.

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