

“The Cradle Will Rock” (Original cast recording) (1938)

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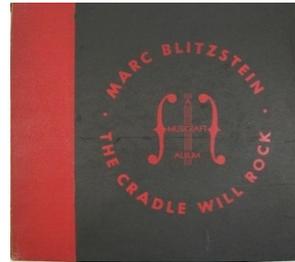
Essay by Howard Pollack (guest post)*



Marc Blitzstein



Original label



Original album packaging

The opera “The Cradle Will Rock” (1936-37), composer-librettist Marc Blitzstein’s first big success, proved a turning point in his career, and its premiere, a legendary event in the annals of the American theater.

Born into a Philadelphia family of Jewish-Russian heritage, Blitzstein (1905-1964), early in life, earned some notice as a piano prodigy, but he increasingly turned his attention to musical composition, which he studied with Rosario Scalero at the Curtis Institute, Nadia Boulanger in Paris, and Arnold Schoenberg in Berlin. Completing his education while still in his early twenties, and settling in New York, he spent the next ten years eking out a living as a lecturer and writer on contemporary music, of which he had vast knowledge, while periodically retreating to Europe to compose a variety of instrumental, vocal, and stage works. Although primarily homosexual, during these years he usually traveled with his lover and later wife, the writer Eva Goldbeck, to whom he dedicated most of his early scores, and who died tragically young of anorexia in 1936, just prior to the creation of “The Cradle Will Rock.”

Blitzstein radical tendencies, partly conditioned by his socialist family, initially took artistic expression in his interest in avant-garde trends, very much including the music of Stravinsky. But in the course of the 1930s, as he became increasingly involved with the New York’s Composers’ Collective, he successfully absorbed more popular currents, including not only the music of German composers Kurt Weill and Hanns Eisler, but the theatrical ideas of one of their principal collaborators, playwright Bertolt Brecht. Writing the lyrics and music for some satirical revues, Blitzstein proved not only a distinctive songwriter, one able to set a catchy melody to unusually pungent harmonies, but a fine lyricist as well, with a special talent for clever rhymes and witty conceits, and for combining words and music so that the whole sounded utterly natural and spontaneous.

In late 1935, playing for Brecht a three-person musical scene on the theme of prostitution that he had written for the Composers’ Collective, the German playwright told him, “Why don’t you expand this? In our society, prostitution can involve many more things than just our lily white bodies. There is prostitution for gain in so many walks of life: the artist, the preacher, the doctor, the lawyer, the newspaper editor. Why don’t you pit them against this scene of literal

selling?" In this suggestion, Blitzstein found the inspiration for "The Cradle Will Rock," set in Steeltown, U.S.A., in which, on the night of a big steel union drive, a prostitute, The Moll, finds herself in night court with a kindly vagrant, Harry Druggist, and the union organizer, Larry Foreman, but also, by mistake, with the town's anti-union Liberty Committee, including Reverend Salvation, Editor Daily, Dr. Specialist, two artists (Yasha, a violinist, and Dauber, a painter), and President Prexy and Professors Mamie and Trixie of Steeltown University. As the Liberty Committee awaits the town's steel magnate Mr. Mister to bail them out, flashbacks explore the corruption and venality of the committee members, in particular, their willingness to do the bidding of the Mister family for personal gain: Reverend Salvation preaches the gospel of Mrs. Mister; Editor Daily hires Mr. Mister's son Junior as a foreign journalist; Yasha and Dauber kowtow to Mrs. Mister; President Prexy expands the school's compulsory military training; and Dr. Specialist covers up the violent assault of a pro-union worker. Harry Druggist confesses, much to his regret, that he, too, succumbed to Mr. Mister's machinations. At the climax, Mr. Mister arrives and attempts to bribe Larry Foreman as well, but the union organizer rebukes his offer, after which word arrives that the steel union drive has been successful.

Something of the opera's stagecraft and structure owed a debt to playwright Clifford Odets's similarly pro-union "Waiting for Lefty" (1935), and naturally to Brecht, to whom Blitzstein dedicated the work, while the music, written for singing actors as opposed to classically trained singers, showed the influences of not only Stravinsky, Weill, and Eisler, but also a wide range of vernacular American musics, including the blues. One of its most striking features involved its intricate and carefully calibrated employment of such traditional resources as recitative, song, chorus, accompanied and unaccompanied dialogue, and instrumental music, along with such novel ones as speech-song, accented recitation, and both accompanied and unaccompanied rhythmic recitation. All this resulted in a stunning organic fluidity that constituted an exciting new development in the history of world musical theater.

In early 1937, the youthful team of producer John Houseman and director Orson Welles decided to mount the work with the unit of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) that they administered, namely, Project 891. A division of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Federal Theatre Project, headed by Hallie Flanagan, launched during its brief tenure (1935-39) hundreds of productions of old and new plays around the country at affordable prices, thus enriching America's theatrical life enormously, while providing modest salaries to, in any given year, about ten thousand people associated with the theater. Given the rising tide of opposition against the Federal Theatre in Congress on account of the group's alleged leftist bias, Flanagan had her concerns about funding a work like "Cradle" that touched on one of the most divisive and controversial issues of the day in so partisan a fashion; but she gave her assent nonetheless. "It took no wizardry to see that this was not a play set to music, nor music illustrated by actors," she recalled, "but music + play equaling something new and better than either."

Restricted by whom they could hire, Houseman and Welles nonetheless snagged two rising stars for the production: Will Geer (later Grandpa Walton on the television series "The Waltons") for the part of Mr. Mister, and Howard Da Silva (born Howard Silverblatt, and later to originate the role of Jud Fry in "Oklahoma!") as Larry Foreman. They also engaged an orchestra of over 30 players and a small interracial chorus. Welles helped design elaborate sets for a production described by Houseman as falling "somewhere between realism, vaudeville and oratory."

However, days before the show's scheduled June 16, 1937, premiere at the Maxine Elliott's Theatre, the WPA announced cuts in their arts program, including the postponement of any new play. "This was obviously censorship under a different guise," recalled Blitzstein. Surely not coincidentally, escalating turmoil in the steel industry recently had reached a new peak with the Memorial Day Massacre, in which the Chicago police fired into a crowd demonstrating against Republic Steel, leaving ten dead and scores wounded.

On opening night, faced with a padlocked theater manned by security guards, Houseman and Welles, fearing that the play now never would be produced, at the last minute found an available theater, the Venice, and led the hundreds of ticket-holders who had gathered outside the Maxine Elliott's uptown for an impromptu renegade performance--without sets, costumes, or orchestra. Because union rules, ironically, made it impossible for actors without Actors' Equity membership to appear on a commercial stage, Welles proposed that the actors perform their parts from the audience, with Blitzstein on stage narrating and playing the piano. Although they stood the chance of losing their much-needed jobs, most of the cast and crew agreed to this scheme.

Amid the hubbub of opening night, it remained uncertain whether the show actually would proceed as planned, but as Blitzstein, alone on stage at a piano, began to sing the opening number, in one of the most riveting moments in the history of the American theater, the young, slender actress playing The Moll, Olive Stanton, seated in a loge box, started to sing along, taking over the number as the lighting director, Abe Feder, illuminated her with a makeshift follow spot. "If Olive Stanton had not risen on cue in the box," recalled another cast member, "I doubt if the rest of us would have had the courage to stand up and carry on." At the end of the performance, the house erupted in what Orson Welles later described as "that mighty, loving explosion which can be heard but once or twice in a theatre lifetime."

This renegade production gave another two weeks of performances, fortunately without any negative repercussions for the cast, although Welles subsequently resigned from the WPA, and Houseman, who did not have American citizenship, found himself forced out under new WPA guidelines that forbade the hiring of aliens. Houseman and Welles went on to form their own company, the Mercury Theatre, which gave more performances of "The Cradle Will Rock," with Blitzstein at the piano, as at the Venice, but with cast members now seated in chairs on stage. Houseman and Welles presented this "oratorio version" during the 1937-38 season, not only at the Mercury Theatre, but then, in a co-production with Sam Grisman, at the Windsor Theatre. During this period, the opera featured some slight changes of personnel, including replacing Will Geer with Ralph MacBane as Mr. Mister. In April 1938, Musicraft, a small, new record company, released an abridged recording of the work with the Windsor cast, and with Blitzstein at the piano and providing his own narration to help fill in some of the holes.

In subsequent years, the work retained some presence in the repertory, especially among small community and school theaters, who typically presented the piece with spare sets and piano accompaniment, as in its early days. Only rarely was the piece heard with orchestra. In 1947, for instance, Leonard Bernstein, who had played the piano in the work's Boston-area premiere in 1939, conducted the opera with a cast accompanied by the New York City Symphony. And in 1960, the New York City Opera gave a full-fledged production, with sets, costumes, and

orchestra, as originally intended. But these performances proved exceptional. Later recordings of this classic work similarly featured piano as opposed to orchestral accompaniment.

Meanwhile, the Musicraft release, represented here in the National Recording Registry, remains not only historically important (as the recording world's first recognized "original cast recording") but compelling in its own right, with the performers, most of whom had been with the show from the beginning, delivering an enormously vital account of the piece, alternately deeply poignant and piercingly sardonic.

Howard Pollack is John and Rebecca Moores Professor of Music at the University of Houston, and the author of six books in the field of American music, including "Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man"; "George Gershwin: His Life and Work," and "Marc Blitzstein: His Life, His Work, His World."

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Photo of Marc Blitzstein courtesy of Howard Pollack.

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