

**Kurt Weill's**  
**Street Scene**



**A Study Guide prepared by**  
**VIRGINIA OPERA**



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# **STREET SCENE**

## **AN AMERICAN OPERA**

Music by KURT WEILL

Book by ELMER RICE, adapted from his play of the same name

Lyrics by LANGSTON HUGHES

### **Premiere**

First performance on January 9, 1947 at the Adelphi Theater in New York City

### **Setting**

The action takes place outside a tenement house in New York City on an evening in June 1946.

### **Cast of Characters**

Abraham Kaplan, an elderly man with Socialist views	Tenor
Greta Fiorentino, wife of Lippo	Soprano
Carl Olsen	Bass
Emma Jones, mother of Mae and Vincent	Mezzo soprano
Olga Olsen, wife of Carl	Contralto
Shirley Kaplan, a school teacher and daughter of Abraham	Speaking role
Henry Davis, janitor of the tenement house	Baritone
Willie Maurrant, son of Anna and Frank	Child
Anna Maurrant, wife of Frank	Soprano
Sam Kaplan, a student, son of Abraham	Tenor
Daniel Buchanan	Buffo tenor
Frank Maurrant, a stagehand, husband of Anna	Bass-baritone
George Jones, husband of Emma	Baritone
Steve Sankey, a milk collector,	Speaking role
Filippo "Lippo" Fiorentino, a music teacher	Tenor
Jennie Hildebrand, a high school graduate	Mezzo soprano
2 <sup>nd</sup> graduate, friend of Jennie	Soprano
3 <sup>rd</sup> graduate, friend of Jennie	Mezzo soprano
Charlie Hildebrand	Child
Mary Hildebrand	Child
Grace Davis, daughter of Henry	Child
Rose Maurrant, daughter of Anna and Frank	Soprano
Harry Easter, Rose's boss	Baritone
Mae Jones, daughter of Emma and George	Dancer/Singer
Dick McGann, a ladies' man	Dancer/Singer
Vincent Jones, a cab driver, son of Emma	Speaking Role
Doctor Wilson	Speaking Role

Officer Murphy, a policeman  
City Marshall  
Fred Cullen  
1st nursemaid  
2<sup>nd</sup> nursemaid

Speaking Role  
Speaking Role  
Speaking Role  
Soprano  
Mezzo soprano

Ensemble: Policemen, Milkman, Old Clothes Man, Music Student, Intern, Ambulance Driver, Married Couple, Passersby, Neighbors, Children et al.

## MUSICAL NUMBERS

### ACT 1

Ain't it awful, the heat? (*Ensemble*)  
I got a marble and a star (*Henry Davis*)  
Get a load of that (*Trio: Mmes. Fiorentino, Jones and Olsen*)  
When a woman has a baby (*Arietta: Buchanan with Mmes. Fiorentino, Maurant and Jones*)  
Somehow I never could believe (*Aria: Anna*)  
Ice Cream Sextet (*Lippo, George, Carl, Mmes. Fiorentino, Olsen*)  
Let things be like they always was (*Aria: Frank*)  
Wrapped in a ribbon and tied in a bow (*Jennie and Ensemble*)  
Lonely House (*Sam*)  
Wouldn't you like to be on Broadway (*Harry*)  
What good would the moon be? (*Rose*)  
Moon-faced, starry-eyed (*Mae, Dick*)  
Remember that I care (*Sam, Rose*)

### ACT 2

Catch me if you can (*Children*)  
There'll be trouble (*Trio: Anna, Frank, Rose*)  
A boy like you (*Anna*)  
We'll go away together (*Duet: Rose, Sam*)  
The woman who lived up there (*Ensemble*)  
Lullaby (*Duet: 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> nursemaids*)  
I loved her too (*Ensemble: Frank, Rose and chorus*)  
Don't forget the lilac bush (*Duet: Sam, Rose*)

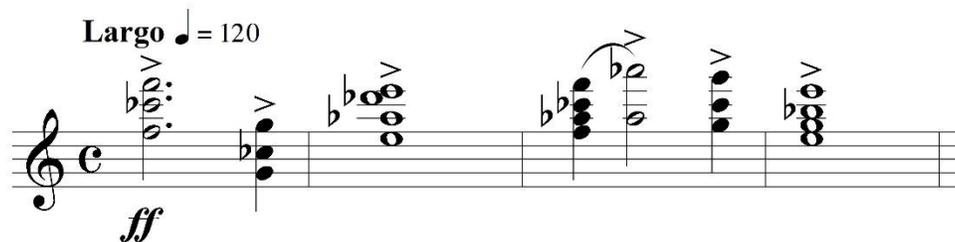
## Brief Plot Summary

Outside a tenement house in New York City, a group of ethnically diverse neighbors complain about the heat wave. We meet Anna Maurant, unhappily married to her surly husband Frank and Sam Kaplan, son of the Socialist Abe Kaplan and in love with Anna's daughter Rose. Anna is the subject of gossip among the female residents as she is rumored to be involved in an affair with Steve Sankey, the milk collector. Rose contends with unwanted advances from her boss Mr. Easter and Vincent Jones, son of the neighborhood gossip Emma Jones. Rose and Sam have formed a close friendship based on their mutual desire to escape to a better life. The next day sees tragedy erupt when Frank returns home unexpectedly to find Sankey upstairs with Anna. The violence that follows leads Rose to decide to leave for good; putting off romance with Sam indefinitely.

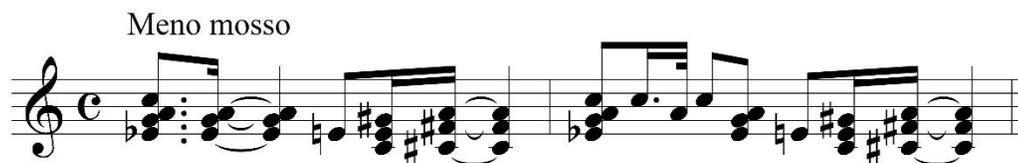
## Full Plot Synopsis with Musical Examples

### ACT 1

The orchestral introduction opens with a loud and dissonant version of the refrain from Sam's aria "Lonely House" heard later in the act:



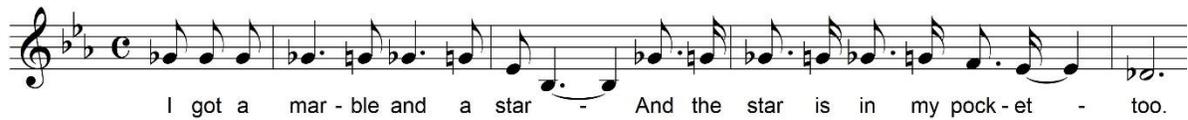
As the curtain rises, another quote from a later number is heard, as the theme from "Moon Faced and Starry Eyed" plays on a distant radio.



We are outside a tenement house in a lower middle-class neighborhood in New York City on an evening in June, 1946. Throughout the action, natural street noises are heard, such as traffic sounds and vendors calling to customers. Residents of the building are variously seen on the sidewalk or from their apartment windows. Abe Kaplan, an ardent Socialist, is reading a newspaper. Emma Jones and Greta Fiorentino complain about the sweltering heat, joined by

Olga Olsen and her husband Carl. Abe offers disgruntled commentary on the violence reported in the “capitalist papers”.

As their ensemble ends, the janitor Henry Davis emerges, singing a happy-go-lucky tune. (Blues: “I got a marble and a star”):



When young Willie Maurrant shouts up to his mother for a dime, Anna appears at the window. The other housewives invite her down to “be sociable”. Anna agrees. While they await her, Emma, Greta and Olga exchange gossipy whispers about Anna’s supposed affair with the milk collector Steve Sankey in a breathless trio, “Get a load of that”.

Anna arrives observing that her daughter Rose has not yet returned home from her job at a real estate office. A young college-aged man enters, carrying several books; he is Abe Kaplan’s son Sam. He is disappointed to learn that Rose is late coming home. Sam leaves for the library as all the neighbors save Emma, who doesn’t think much of reading, remark on his gentle nature. Another resident, Daniel Buchanan, enters with some fruit he’s bought for his pregnant wife. Daniel, in a state of nerves over the baby’s imminent arrival, claims that pregnancy is harder for a man than a woman, much to the amusement of the women (Arietta: “When a woman has a baby”). They are interrupted by the off-stage voice of Mrs. Buchanan calling for her husband; he hurries inside.

Frank Maurrant, stagehand for a local theater and Anna’s husband, enters, home from a grueling day of rehearsals. He announces that the crew will be in New Haven tomorrow for an out-of-town tryout, much to Anna’s apparent interest. Frank is displeased to learn that Rose has not yet returned home, leveling criticism at Anna for not knowing where her daughter is. He declares that Rose will be different from other irresponsible young people if he has anything to say about it. As he goes upstairs to wash, Anna begins to muse out loud on the state of her life and her marriage. (Aria: “Somehow I never could believe”):



Anna expresses her hope for a brighter future as all eyes are on a new arrival: Steve Sankey. Sankey offers small talk about the heat as Emma Jones pointedly asks after his family. Sankey leaves, on his way to buy a cold drink for his wife. Anna, wondering aloud where her son Willie might be, hurries off in the same direction as Sankey, sparking renewed scandalous speculation among the others. Mr. Olson predicts that someday Sankey will be killed by Frank. Mrs. Olsen enters, excitedly reporting that she saw Anna and Sankey together down the street.

The tension of the moment is broken by the arrival of Lippo Fiorentino, an exuberant Italian music instructor and husband of Greta. He bears an armload of ice cream cones which he bestows on his neighbors. Lippo, Emma, Greta, Jones, Olsen and Henry lift their voices in praise of ice cream (“Ice Cream Sextet”)

Anna enters, explaining to her surly husband that she was looking for Willie. Already irritated by Rose’s absence, Frank threatens to beat his son, prompting a debate among the neighbors about child-rearing. Abe Kaplan incurs a rebuke from Frank when he begins preaching that the evils of “kepitalism” lead parents to exploit their children. Losing his temper, Frank must be restrained from attacking Abe, settling instead for a lengthy diatribe against changing times (Aria: “Let things be like they always was”):

Let things be like they al-ways was, That's good e-nough - for me. \_\_\_\_\_

Continued discussions on this theme are interrupted by the arrival of a group of students fresh from graduation exercises, happily singing their school song. They include young Jenny Hildebrand, whose family is scheduled to be evicted from their home in the tenement building the following day for non-payment of rent. Jenny recounts the excitement of graduation day to her neighbors (Ensemble: “Wrapped in a ribbon and tied in a bow”)

Allegro non troppo

We sat in our snow-y white dres-ses, - and then it was my turn to go.

Jenny’s joy is infectious; everyone begins dancing until the spell of merriment is abruptly snuffed out by the intrusion of Steve Sankey on his way home. Frank, instantly suspicious, asks Anna why he seems to hang around. At that, Willie bursts in, disheveled and crying. When he reports he got into a fight because of something another boy said, Frank demands to know what it was as Anna nervously steers her son indoors. Frank departs for Callahan’s bar for a drink and the rest of the tenants indulge in more speculative gossip, certain that Willie’s friends are calling his mother a whore.

The neighbors disperse to their various apartments, leaving the sidewalk empty as Sam enters with the bearing of a man in despair. He sings of his intense loneliness (Arioso: “Lonely house”):

Lone - ly house, lone - ly me! Fun-ny with so man-y neigh-bors,

As Sam retreats into the house, Rose enters, accompanied by Harry Easter, the manager of her real estate office. Rose bids him good night and starts to make her way inside, but Harry is intent on a kiss. When Rose demures, Harry kisses her anyway. Offended, Rose threatens to find another job. Harry claims to have friends in show business who could make her a stage actress (Song: “Wouldn’t you like to be on Broadway”):



Harry goes on to suggest he and Rose share an apartment, brushing aside Rose’s question about his wife. Rose explains that she wants a different sort of future for herself (Cavatina: “What good would the moon be”):



A sudden scream from inside the tenement house signals that Mrs. Buchanan is in labor, just as Rose spies her father returning from the saloon. Fearing her father’s reaction to the sight of Harry, she begs him to leave, but Frank is already suspicious and full of questions. Rose’s explanations that Mr. Easter is her office manager; that she worked late due to the office being closed for a funeral the following day; and that they had dinner, fail to appease Frank. When he asks if Easter is married, Rose’s reply is guilty silence. Erupting in anger, Frank storms into the house, leaving Rose to dream of finding true love some day and leaving the neighborhood for good.

She hurries off to call for a doctor for Mrs. Buchanan just as Emma’s daughter Mae enters on the arm of a young man, Dick McGann. He’s wants a kiss, but Mae seems bored. Dick explains that he’s crazy about her (Song: Moon-faced, starry-eyed”):



A swig of gin from Dick’s flask puts Mae in a more romantic frame of mind; they hurry off to spend the night together. Rose returns, assuring Buchanan that the doctor is coming. Vincent Jones, Mae’s brother, enters after day’s work as a cab driver. He begins to handle Rose roughly, prompting Sam to come to her defense. Vincent, jeering at the weaker man, knocks Sam down as Emma Jones enters. Explaining the scene, Vincent claims Sam was jealous to see another man saying good-night to Rose. Emma, escorting her son upstairs to supper, snidely insinuates that Rose is just as promiscuous as her mother.

Sam, humiliated and disconsolate, is comforted by Rose, who assures him that his future is bright. They begin a lengthy duet (“Remember that I care”). Sam is feeling hopeless about life, but Rose tells him of her walk through the park on her way to work that morning. Coming upon a lilac bush, she was reminded of the time Sam read a poem about lilacs to her. Together, they recite a portion of Walt Whitman’s poem “When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloomed”:

*In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash’d palings,  
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,  
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love,  
With every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the dooryard,  
With delicate-color’d blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,  
A sprig with its flower I break.*

Rose confides that, for her, that sprig represents the possibility of being happy together. She tells him “Remember that I care”.

The doctor arrives, greeted by the anxious Buchanan. As they go up to attend to his wife, Frank impatiently calls for Rose. Sam asks her for a kiss, which Rose gladly gives. Henry emerges, quietly singing to himself as Rose, looking out from her window above, bids Sam good night.

## ACT II

### Scene 1

As dawn breaks the following morning, the tenement house slowly comes to life with the sounds of alarm clocks, dogs barking and other noises. The doctor wearily emerges from the house, patiently telling Buchanan that his wife will be fine. Mae and Dick enter; Mae appears to be hung-over and in no mood for further romance. Passers-by wander on and off: a milkman, a policeman, a homeless man. A group of children gather, playing in the street (“Catch me if you can”):



One, two, three for sup-er-man, come and catch me if you can.

The various residents of the tenement house gradually appear and gather outside. Sam is calling for Rose, who must wash the breakfast dishes. Daniel Buchanan tells Mrs. Fiorentino that his wife delivered a baby girl; Lippo wishes his wife could have children. Emma Jones and Anna emerge, talking of last night’s birth. Mmes. Emma directs a pointed remark to Anna that people should look after their own families, leaving to walk her dog as Rose enters. Anna leaves to shop for a chicken to make soup for Mrs. Buchanan. The two youngest Hildebrand children leave for school, dispassionately noting that today their family will be turned out of their home, thanks to their father having run off with another woman.

Frank enters, carrying a bag, asking Anna’s whereabouts. Rose takes the opportunity to suggest that life might be better if he were a little nicer to Anna. When Anna returns with the chicken, a trio ensues (“There’ll be trouble”) in which Anna defends herself from Frank’s accusations of neglecting the family, Rose defends her mother and Frank turns a deaf ear to their protestations. Frank leaves for Hartford, saying he doesn’t know when he will return. Alone now, Rose hints to Anna that Steve Sankey should not come around, as people are talking. Anna answers grimly that it might be better if she were dead.

Rose takes the chicken up to the ice-box as Willie comes out to leave for school. Anna, seeing a button is missing on his shirt, wants to pin it, much to her son’s annoyance. Anna tells him it’s important to know how to behave (Song: “A boy like you”):



Willie runs off; Anna goes inside to start the soup. Rose, who joined them during Anna’s song, is stopped by Sam’s sister, Shirley Kaplan. Shirley cautions Rose not to get involved with Sam since it will be years before he can support a family. Sam enters as Shirley leaves for work; he and Rose again express their frustration with life in the city. Sam asks Rose to go away with him, claiming he’d gladly give up law school if they could be together. They fantasize about sharing a happy life (Duet: “We’ll go away together”):



They are interrupted by the arrival of Harry Easter, ready to escort Rose to the funeral service. She introduces the two men. When Easter suggests they spend the rest of the day at the beach, Rose declines; the two depart. Sam remains as people come and go: a music student arrives for a lesson with Lippo; Daniel Buchanan enters with medicine for his wife. As Anna leans out from her window to promise delivery of the soup, Steve Sankey enters. Seeing him, Rose quietly says they must talk; noting that Frank is away, she bids him come up.

As violin music is heard emanating from Lippo’s home, two men from the City Marshall’s office come with a warrant to evict the Hildebrand family, summoning Henry to confirm the correct location.

Frank enters, having changed his mind about the trip to New Haven. Sam looks on in horror as Frank sees that the window shades of his apartment are drawn. Frank shoves Sam out of his way as he runs into the house. Sam calls out to Anna to warn her. Gun shots are heard. Sankey’s terrified face is seen at the window; Frank pulls him away and a final shot rings out.

A crowd quickly gathers around the house, voices crying out in confusion. Frank, bursts out of the house, waving his gun at those who would restrain him. He disappears into the cellar as Emma Jones calls for an ambulance and a policeman arrives. As the crowd continues to cluster around the steps of the house, Rose enters alone, asking for her mother. Anna is brought down on a stretcher, gravely injured. Sam laments the tragedy while the crowd comments on all that has happened (Choral scene and Lament: “The woman who lived up there”):

SAM



Now love and death have linked their arms to - geth - er and gone a - way in - to an - oth - er bourn;

## Scene 2

It is mid-afternoon of the same day. Men are moving furniture from the Hildebrand’s home onto the street. Two nurse-maids pushing baby carriages stroll by, excitedly realizing this is the scene of the murder that happened that morning. They take gruesome pleasure in noting the broken glass of the Marrant home and re-reading an account of the crime in the latest newspaper. As one of the babies begins to cry, they sing an ironic lullaby, alternating soothing words with gossip about the murderer and his victims (Lullaby: “Sleep, baby dear”):



Sleep, ba - by dear. - The pic - ture is right here. Drowse, ti - ny tot. It shows how he got shot. —

Rose enters, dressed in black. She asks the policeman on guard for news of her father, who is still at large. Sam enters; Rose reports that Anna passed away. Sam tells her that he has taken Willie to the home of Rose’s Aunt. Rose asks Shirley Kaplan if she would go up to the Marrant home with her, to find a burial outfit for Anna; they go inside.

Shots are heard amid a general commotion. Daniel Buchanan appears with the news that Frank has been captured. Rose comes out; her neighbors tell her to go back inside, but Rose insists on seeing her father. Two policemen appear with Frank in tow; he asks them for a moment to speak with his daughter as a crowd of onlookers gathers around them.

Frank remorsefully tells Rose that, despite all that has happened, he did love his wife (Finale: “I loved her too”). Acknowledging he faces the death penalty, Frank bids her to look after Willie as the police take him away.

The crowd disperses, leaving Sam alone with Rose. Rose tells him that she plans to go away. Proclaiming his love, Sam begs to go with her. But the events of the day have changed Rose’s attitude; she now feels she should face her situation on her own. Sam protests that they belong together; Rose replies that confusing “love” with “belonging” may have doomed her parents; Rose does not wish to belong to anyone.

Rose tells the distraught Sam that their parting need not be permanent, recalling again the meaning of the lilac bush (Duet: “Don’t forget the lilac bush”). A middle-aged couple arrives, interested in renting the newly-vacated Maurant home. Shirley brings Rose the bag she’s packed for her. Rose gives Sam a gentle goodbye kiss; he runs into the house. Rose picks up her bag and walks away.

A calm descends on the tenement house. Abe Kaplan asks Shirley why Sam is crying on the bed, but otherwise things are settling into a routine: neighbors again complain about the heat; passers-by come and go; the house-hunting couple are taken upstairs by Henry. The curtain falls.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Kurt Weill’s *Street Scene* is an adaptation of a 1929 stage play of the same title by Elmer Rice (1892-1967). Rice had caused a sensation on Broadway in 1923 with his play *The Adding Machine*, starring Edward G. Robinson, but by 1929 had little to show for his career as a playwright, financially or otherwise. *Street Scene* amounts to an expansion of *Sidewalks of New York*, an experimental drama Rice had written a few years earlier, notable for containing no spoken dialogue. Rice completed *Street Scene* in 1928. He had difficulty in getting it produced, as the unusually naturalistic script was considered unworkable by most theater professionals. In the end, the play was accepted by producer and boxing promoter William Brady.

George Cukor, later to direct several iconic Hollywood films, was hired to direct the premiere production of *Street Scene* but abandoned the project just as rehearsals were getting under way. Though he had scant directing experience, Rice replaced Cukor as stage director. Rice’s innovative, realistic style proved successful; opening on Jan. 9, 1929 at New York’s Playhouse Theater, *Street Scene* enjoyed a run of 601 performances. The play went on to tour the United States and see a production in London. *Street Scene* won the 1929 Pulitzer Prize in drama. Rice adapted his play for Samuel Goldwyn’s 1931 film version, directed by King Vidor. Several actors from the original Broadway production reprised their roles for the motion picture.

A few weeks after the stage version debuted, the American composer Deems Taylor asked Rice for permission to create an operatic adaptation. Rice was agreeable, but Taylor never followed through.

It seems evident that much of *Street Scene* is semi-autobiographical in that the character of Sam Kaplan is clearly modeled on Rice himself. A summary of Sam’s character shows him to be a clone of his creator in virtually every respect. Consider:

- Sam was raised in a Jewish family in New York City;
- He is an avowed atheist;
- He is preparing for a law career, but is highly ambivalent about this choice;

- He is a book-lover, never without several books on hand

All these characteristics mirror Elmer Rice, who also attended law school but rejected the law for a literary career. In addition, the character of Abe Kaplan, a Socialist who preaches revolution, is likely based on Rice's own grandfather, who was active in the European revolutions of 1848 and had a close relationship with his grandson.

One can even point to Rice's father as a partial model for the character of Frank Maurant. Rice had a distant relationship with his father, a man who withheld affection from his son; this roughly corresponds to Rose's troubled relationship with Frank, who can only express love after tragedy strikes.

## **THE CREATION OF THE OPERA**

The career of composer Kurt Weill (1900-1950) can conveniently be divided into two large sections: a European period consisting of somewhat avant-garde works and the final American period marked by greater attention to commercial appeal. Yet throughout his life, he focused on socially relevant subject matter with a distinctive musical voice.

By the time Weill and his wife (the noted singing actress Lotte Lenya) emigrated to the United States in 1933, he was a celebrated musician thanks to his collaborations with the playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), including *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) and *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930). These works were examples of the Brechtian theory of "epic theater", in which traditional norms of theatrical "realism" were rejected to distance the audience from the plot and characters, thus enabling them to pay greater heed to the overt Marxism of Brecht's political vision.

Weill's frustration with Brecht's disinterest in abstract musical merit led to the dissolution of their partnership. At about this time, the rise of the Third Reich in Germany made Weill's continued presence there untenable.

Once established in America, Weill seized the opportunity to collaborate with several literary luminaries including Moss Hart, Ira Gershwin, Alan Jay Lerner, Maxwell Anderson and Ogden Nash. His goal was to establish a distinctly American brand of opera that would shun the conventions of previous centuries in favor of works combining artistic merit with mass appeal to a broader public. Successful productions preceding *Street Scene* include *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1939), *Lady in the Dark* (1941), and *One Touch of Venus* (1943),

Weill was immediately attracted to Elmer Rice's play *Street Scene* after seeing a production in Berlin not long after its premiere, as well as King Vidor's 1931 film version. He met the playwright in 1937, expressing his interest in creating an opera based on the material. Rice turned down his offer, only to reconsider years later when Weill, now a successful Broadway composer, asked again in 1945.

Rice's commitment to work with Weill came with a stipulation: he was to create the libretto himself, to protect the integrity of his drama. Next, a lyricist needed to be engaged. Despite the lack of African-American characters in the play, Rice and Weill selected the black poet Langston Hughes. Rice offered this succinct explanation for choosing Hughes:

"We didn't want any slick, wise-cracking lyrics." Weill was likely intrigued by the similarities in his background and that of Hughes; both had been politically radical in their early years, only to develop a more moderate voice now in mid-career. Hughes himself made this observation:

"That I, an American Negro, should be chosen to write the lyrics of *Street Scene* did not seem odd or strange to Kurt Weill and Elmer Rice. They wanted someone who understood the problems of the common people... They wanted someone who wrote simply."

Partly because of Hughes's presence on the team, and partly because Weill was interested in writing a blues number, Hughes escorted the composer to Harlem, where they listened to blues artists in local clubs, as well as the sing-song voices of street children as they played.

There was never any question of offering *Street Scene* to a traditional opera company such as the Metropolitan Opera; Weill was adamant that the piece be produced on the Broadway stage as part of his vision of a new style of American opera. Though he initially subtitled the work "A Broadway Opera", the published score lists it as "An American Opera".

Work proceeded laboriously on the creation of the opera. In contrast to standard Broadway practice, Weill did most of the orchestrations himself. The two musical numbers in a frankly popular style, "Wrapped in a Ribbon" and "Moon Faced and Starry Eyed" he assigned to Ted Royal for instrumentation. Hughes found that Rice wished to exert some control over lyrics as well; in the end, Rice demanded co-authorship in the production credits along with the poet.

The artistic team was completed with Charles Friedman as stage director and choreographer Anna Sokolow; the opera was produced by The Playwright's Company. By the time *Street Scene* was ready for out-of-town tryouts, all parties had grave concerns regarding the show's viability. Poor attendance and negative reviews were compounded by Rice's absence due to illness. Lyrics, libretto and music were pored over endlessly with an eye to last-minute revision. There were undoubtedly lowered expectations when *Street Scene* opened at the Adelphi Theater on January 9, 1947.

Yet for all the uncertainty, *Street Scene* proved to be a critical success and a modest hit. While its run of 148 performances was unremarkable for a Broadway musical, it was a rare achievement for an opera. Weill pronounced the opera as among his most satisfying achievements.

## Relevance of Social Themes in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America

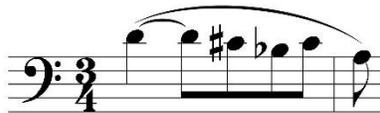
One of the most remarkable aspects of *Street Scene*, observable in both Rice's play and Weill's opera, is the fact that the social issues raised and discussed by the characters remain controversial in America in our own time. While social progress has occurred in American Society in many respects, nonetheless the lives of the cast of *Street Scene* depict many topics that are virtually unchanged in our current national dialogue. Here are some examples:

- The character of Abe Kaplan, the aging Socialist revolutionary, foreshadows the positions held by Senator Bernie Sanders on the contemporary political stage. Like Sen. Sanders, Kaplan is prone to repeated calls for revolution to end the economic disparity between upper and lower classes.
- The so-called #MeToo movement currently prominent in news headlines has been created by the phenomenon of male privilege asserting itself in chronic sexual aggression towards women, and the resultant repudiation of such aggression. All this is present throughout *Street Scene*, not only in the attempts of Harry Easter and Vincent Jones to take advantage of Rose Maurant, but in Dick's persistence in hounding Mae for sex. One may also cite Frank's abusive treatment of his wife Anna.
- The perennial American preoccupation with immigration also arises in the opera. Just as contemporary debate features those who welcome immigrants as key to America's greatness versus those who wish to exclude "foreigners", the same debate takes place in Act 1. Two lines of dialogue for Frank Maurant neatly sum up the attitude of many present-day Americans toward immigrants  
*"If you don't like the way things is run here, why in hell don't you go back where you came from?"* and, later,  
*"We don't want no foreigners comin' in, tellin' us how to run things."*
- Frank's calls for a return to "law and order" foreshadow another common talking point for modern politicians and large segments of the populace at large.
- Even America's current struggle with gun violence is a prominent element of the opera's plotline, as gun violence results in two deaths and certain execution for Frank. It is also notable that these gunshot deaths are linked to domestic abuse, which accurately reflects a large percentage of gun violence in America.

## Notable Features of Musical Style

A useful way to approach the musical score to Weill's *Street Scene* is to recognize that the music assigned to the four principal characters (Anna, Frank, Rose and Sam) amounts to a show-within-a-show. Whereas the remaining supporting characters are given music in frankly popular styles (blues, jazz and so forth), the four principals express themselves in music of an operatic nature in terms of vocal demands, musical complexity, orchestration and motivic content.

Bizet's *Carmen* is the point of departure for the recurring motive first heard in the orchestra under dialogue at Frank Maurant's first entrance. Both in its implications of tragic fate and its rhythm and general contour, it seems related to the so-called "fate motive" in *Carmen*.



Fate motive, *Carmen*



Fate motive, *Street Scene*

Weill attempted to create a score reflecting the ethnic diversity of the characters being depicted. The result is a kaleidoscopic array of styles with little in common. Many of the "popular" styles are simulations of various genres of American music. For example:

- As noted above, "I got a marble and a star" is a blues, the product of Weill's listening excursions into Harlem cabarets;
- "Wrapped in a ribbon and tied in a bow" is in the style of Rodgers and Hammerstein, perhaps Weill's chief competitor in music theater at the time of *Street Scene*'s premiere. In its innocent dance-like tune it resembles numbers such as "When I marry Mister Snow" (*Carousel*), "I am sixteen going on seventeen" (*The Sound of Music*) and others;
- "What good would the moon be" echoes the style of another of Weill's American competitors, Cole Porter. The suave sophistication of the vocal line is similar to the Porter standard "Night and Day" One is also reminded of the band arrangements of Glenn Miller;
- "Moon Faced and Starry Eyed" is a full-out jitterbug, a dance craze quite in vogue in the United States in the 1940's.

In the “Ice Cream Sextet”, Weill not only created a light-hearted parody of the many concerted ensembles of classic Italian opera, he also appears to have recalled a moment from his final European composition: “The Seven Deadly Sins”. In the lyrical *Andante cantabile* section (“When I go into the drug store, Ah, eet is da wonderful spot!”), the six characters begin listing their favorite American treats: chicken hash, potato mash, baked beans, chop suey, and so on. The exquisite pleasure with which they sing of these foods is very much in the lyrical style of the “Gluttony” movement of the earlier work, in which Anna’s family members back in Louisiana sing ecstatically of crab meat, pork chops, sweet corn, chicken, and biscuits spread with honey.

A literary influence (as opposed to a musical influence) is seen in the text to Sam’s solo “Lonely House”. Langston Hughes’s verse includes this line:

*Unhook the stars and take them down.*

This line is quite similar to a passage from the poem “Funeral blues” by W. H. Auden (1907-1973), dating from 1938:

*The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,*

Given that the Auden poem pre-dates *Street Scene* by nearly a decade and Auden’s prominence as a literary celebrity, it seems unlikely that Hughes was unfamiliar with “Funeral Blues”.

The overtly operatic passages of *Street Scene* (those involving the four tragic characters) are an example of what may be called “American *verismo*”. Like Italian *verismo* operas, Weill’s opera deals with the daily lives of common people rather than nobility or the upper classes. Some of the composer’s musical devices show the influence of Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924). A good example is found in Anna’s aria “Somehow I never could believe” at the section with the text ““Sometimes now I go and take a look, the flower’s dry”, etc. Here, the “trudging” bass line at “flower’s dry” is a favorite Puccinian touch meant to depict weariness of body or soul (see Mimi’s death scene in *La bohème*).

Another connection to Puccini can be seen in comparing Frank and Anna to Michele and Giorgetta in Puccini’s one-act opera *Il Tabarro* (*The Cloak*) (1918). Like Frank, Michele is a hard-working man with a temper whose wife is no longer in love with him and is having an affair with a younger man. Giorgetta has lines that sound very much like the restlessness and discontent Anna expresses in her aria:

*Oh! My dream is quite different!  
I was born in the suburbs, and the air  
Of my Paris is life and joy to me!  
Oh! If some day we could give up forever  
Our vagarious and stupid, bleak, existence!  
It’s no life for a woman in that dark, dingy cabin;  
You should have seen the room of my young days!*

Neither woman has the romantic life she dreamed of as a young girl, and neither has made their peace with the reality of their marriages and the choices they made.

As for Michele and Frank, both are working men with quick tempers who resort to violence in response to their wives' unfaithfulness.

The ultimate significance and legacy of *Street Scene* is the opera's position as a herald of composers such as Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim, who refined the concept of an "American Opera" into a smoother synthesis of Broadway and operatic styles. Bernstein's *West Side Story* and Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, for example, each achieved the creation of a consistent and distinctive musical language rather than presenting a collection of disparate pre-existing styles. Both composers owe Weill a considerable debt for the inspiration of his vision.

## Discussion Questions

1. *Street Scene* features a wide variety of musical styles, ranging from a Jitterbug jazz dance to blues to intensely operatic music. In your opinion, is this variety a strength or a weakness? Explain your response.
2. Kurt Weill attempted to dispel the notion that operas belong only in traditional opera houses, presented by opera companies, by premiering *Street Scene* in a Broadway theater, with the typical Broadway performance schedule of daily shows. Do you agree with his approach? What are the upsides or disadvantages of presenting serious opera in a non-operatic theater?
3. Traditional opera companies never present the same opera on consecutive days. Operas like *Carmen* or *La bohème* are typically presented every three or four days, with other operas performed on the intervening days. Why would it not be advisable to perform *La bohème* several times a week? Consider the vocal demands and the box-office viability in your answer. What accounts for Weill's intent to perform *Street Scene* more frequently?
4. Watch the 1931 King Vidor film of the original play version of *Street Scene*. (It's available on the Internet at <https://archive.org/details/StreetScene1931>.) Compare this version to Weill's adaptation. In what way does the music change the drama? Do you find it an enhancement or a distraction? Why or why not?
5. It has been noted in this study guide that *Street Scene* depicts issues still controversial today, nearly a century after Elmer Rice's original play, including gun violence, advocates of Socialism, immigration and sexual misconduct by men toward women. What does this tell you about American society? Are societal problems essentially impossible to solve? Can you think of any issues in which progress *has* been seen?