German Kabaret and Its Appropriation in Kurt Weill’s “Seeräuber Jenny”

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ABSTRACT  Kabarett, a short-lived countercultural movement in Germany, managed to leave a mark on the world of Western music despite its brief existence. Through simple musical structures and pointed lyrics, Kabarett music captured the attention of the German public from the 1900s to the 1930s. Following Kabarett’s vogue, composers of “high art” genres such as lieder, opera, and musicals appropriated the Kabarett style into the realm of Western art music. In 1928, Kurt Weill utilized a Kabarett sound in his “play with music,” The Threepenny Opera. This paper will analyze selected Kabarett pieces from early 20th Century Germany to establish the harmonic, textual, and formal components that constitute the basis of Kabarett style. These tenets of Kabarett style will then be compared and contrasted with Weill’s “Seeräuber Jenny,” an art piece influenced by the genre, in order to determine the extent of aesthetic borrowing or departure. Previous research on Kabarett has been limited mainly to its history and social implications; this writing will contribute to the academic discourse by examining Kabarett from a music analytical perspective.

INTRODUCTION  Kabarett, a short-lived countercultural movement in Germany, managed to leave a mark on the world of Western music despite its brief existence. Through simple musical structures and pointed lyrics, Kabarett music captured the attention of the German public from the 1900s to the 1930s. Following Kabarett’s vogue, composers of “high art” genres such as lieder, opera, and musicals appropriated the Kabarett style into the realm of Western art music. In 1928, Kurt Weill utilized a Kabarett sound in his and Bertold Brecht’s “play with music,” Die Dreigroschenoper.

The music associated with Kabarett consisted of harmonically simple, strophic songs whose lyrics dealt with topical issues such as sex, fashion, and politics. The most important feature of Kabarett songs was the text, which usually satirized the state of early 20th Century German culture with witty jabs at the political and social environment of the period.

Weill, on the other hand, utilized compositional techniques incompatible with traditional Kabarett, including tonal frustrations, phrasing anomalies, and intricate harmonies which distract from the textual content. In this case, this “high art” piece represents a distortion of its “low art” Kabarett counterparts because while the lyricist Brecht does present the play as a whole as a veiled socialist critique of capitalism, Weill’s sophisticated musical language makes Die Dreigroschenoper a social criticism for a specific market, the opera-goers, rather than for the “common man.”

This writing represents a small piece of research in a larger subject that has not received much academic attention. Very little analysis of Kabarett has been done in the field of music theory. I will analyze selected Kabarett pieces from early 20th Century Germany to establish the harmonic, textual, and formal components that form the basis of Kabarett style. Then I will contrast Weill’s “Seeräuber Jenny,” an art piece influenced by the genre, to the tenets of Kabarett style in order to determine the extent of aesthetic borrowing or departure from which it is derived.

ORIGINAL KABARETT  Background of the Kabarett Movement  While the terms Cabaret and Kabarett were used interchangeably up through the Weimar era, the German language now differentiates them. Cabaret is associated with strip shows, while Kabarett refers to social criticism and political satire1. This research will focus on Kabarett from its inception in Germany in the 1900’s to its decline during World War II.

In January of 1901, Buntes Theater opened in Berlin. It became the first in a four-decade tradition which tried to marry high art with popular culture2. A truly multimedia endeavor, Kabarett combined many genres, “usually songs, comic monologues, dialogues and skits, less frequently dances, pantomimes, puppet shows, or even short films.”3 Kabarett was performed in various venues, from small stages with the audience seated at

3 Jelavich, Berlin Cabaret, 2.
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tables to large halls with row seating. 4

The “common goal” of Kabarett music was “to bring the text alive and make it as powerful as possible by reflecting the political and social issues of the time.” 5 Its subject matter dealt with a wide range of social topics, covering sex, fashion, cultural fads, and politics. 6 In contrast to the highly-charged text, the music consisted of strophic pieces featuring simple rhythms and melodies, with little of the chromaticism so prevalent at the time in the world of art music. 7

Through the first several decades of the early 20th Century, Kabarett remained a popular force in Germany, drawing inspiration from social upheaval brought on by the birth and collapse of the Weimar Republic. The movement began to deteriorate, however, with the rise of the Nazi party, as many Kabarett performers had been liberal, leftist, or Jewish. 8 Brecht and Weill, likewise, fled Germany during this time period for similar reasons. By the end of the Second World War, Kabarett had all but disappeared because, as Lisa Appignansi observes, “the Third Reich's repressive measures made it impossible for contemporary art, public satire, and publication of much literary work.” 9 Despite its brief and relatively volatile history, Kabarett survived through its deep influence on popular culture.

**The Kabarett Style**

The music of the Kabarett carries with it a specific set of regularly utilized forms, harmonic textures, and lyrical content which define it and set it apart from art music. It should be noted however, that not all Kabarett songs possess these characteristics. Composers were not held to these standards, and in fact many did not. The musical generalizations below are simply notable commonalities that helped define the genre’s sound.

Kabarett music tends to fall into simple song forms. See Figure 1. Leo Fall’s “Und Meyer sieht mich freundlich an,” for example, consists of a two-measure introduction followed by six verses of text with the same music repeated underneath each verse. Excluding the introduction, the song exhibits strophic “A A’...” form. Becourt’s “Ah! Ca Ira, Dictum” also adheres to strophic form, this time with only three verses. “Die Dame von der alten Schule,” a long piece composed by Rudolf Nelson, also contains three strophic verses. Friedrich Hollaender’s “Sex Appeal” and Nelson’s “Das Nachtgespenst,” two more examples of three-stanza strophic songs, both have two large sections per verse, an A verse and a B chorus, as well as a brief introduction.

Many Kabarett songs possess sudden tempo changes (Figure 2). “Die Minderwertigen” by Ralph Bermann possesses multiple sections marked langsam (slowly), in an otherwise quicker-paced song. The first, at measure 25, is accompanied by a change of meter from 2/4 to common time. The music regains its original speed at measure 31 before reverting to another langsam section at measure 35. Finally, the music returns to its original tempo and meter in measure 38. Ralph Benatsky’s “Ich kenne ein andres Berlin” begins in a molto vivace 6/8 time. The refrain, however, switches to cut time with a marking of molto lento e con cuore. Effectively, this means the song’s two tempos markings are in completely different speeds and meters. “Lied der Arbeitslosen (Stempellied)” by Kathe Hyan similarly contains abrupt changes in pulse. In this case, only the first and last four measures carry the marking breit. All

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4 Ibid.
6 Jelavich, Berlin Cabaret, 2.
8 Peter Jelavich, Berlin Cabaret, 228.
three stanzas happen entirely in the tempo *langsamer halbe*. While Kabarett songs do not appear to adhere to one specific form for tempo changes, changes in tempo are commonplace. 

Harmonically, the bass often emphasizes scale degree 5 on weaker beats in a jump bass figuration. Strong beats often, but not always, emphasize scale degree 1, though at times they may emphasize any scale degree which fits in a chord with scale degree 5. See Figure 3. Claus Clausberg’s “Bladdy Groth,” which opens in the key of F# minor, emphasizes C# on the weaker beats most times tonic sounds in its opening section. Later, in the final section, the bass rhythm increases so that scale degree 5 is now emphasized on the upbeat. In the first eight measures of the verse of “Das Nachtgespenst,” scale degree 5 of the key of C minor receives emphasis on beat 3 of this common time song, even when the chords change. The verse of “Ich kenne ein andres Berlin” emphasizes scale degree 5 on the second beat of tonic 6/8 measures and in the tonic chord of the first beat.

In a fair number of Kabarett songs, most harmonic motion focuses on the relationship of tonic to its pre-dominant as a way of vamping between two chordal functions (Figure 4). In “Und Meyer sieht mich freundlich an,” tonic moves mostly to the predominant and back as a predominant expansion. In fact, the dominant occurs only twice in this song: once in the two-measure introduction, and once on the second beat of the first measure of the final phrase. Predominant ii is tonicized in measures 13-14 with a viio7/V7/ii to V7/ii progression that resolves to ii into the final phrase at measure 15, further signifying the importance of the tonic-predominant relationship. "Bladdy Groth" emphasizes iio so much that it barely touches an incomplete V7 before cadencing to the tonic of F# minor. The dominant receives only half a beat in the harmonic rhythm while the predominant persists for nearly an entire measure.
case of “Bladdy Groth,” the home key of F# minor is the relative minor of A, which is the dominant of the second key, D major. Also, many Kabarett songs do not modulate at all.

The music tends to fit with the rhyme scheme in Kabarett songs, with phrases and subphrases matching lines of text, which Figure 7 shows. Phrases and subphrases in the music tend to fall into even numbered groups. Hyan’s “Der Einbruch bei Tante Klara,” for example, has four-measure phrases, each of which end in a rhyme. “Die Minderwertigen” contains two-measure subphrases that complement the ABAB rhyme scheme. “Der Rauber-Hauptmann von Kopenick” by Otto Reuter has two two-measure subphrases followed by a four measure subphrase. The coinciding rhyme scheme is AAB. In each of these cases, the phrasing fits well with the rhyme scheme of the text.

Text takes foremost importance in the music of Kabarett. As Candace Burrows notes in her dissertation on the history and music of French and German cabaret, the effectiveness of a song in this genre depends on its literary content. The textual content takes such precedent that there is debate as to whether Kabarett is a musical or literary genre.10


Figure 5. Tonic-dominant relationships

Figure 6. Examples of Modulations

Recording artist Ute Lemper released the album Berlin Cabaret Songs in 1996. 11 Featuring authentic works of Kabarett composers Mischa Spoliansky, Friedrich Hollaender, Rudolf Nelson, and Berthold Goldschmidt, each song is performed both in its original German and in a rough English translation. While the English translations are often not literal, they provide a fairly good overview of the lyrical content, which mainly focuses on social and political issues facing Germany during the time of pieces’ composition.

Spoliansky’s “Alles Schwindel” (“It’s All a Swindle”) provides a scathing indictment of both German culture and the German political structure (Figure 8). As the verses progress, the narrator’s accusations of fraud extend to his or her entire family, the economy, and politicians. The chorus proclaims, “Life’s a swindle. Yes, it’s all a swindle.”

Nelson’s “Mir ist heut so nach Tamerlan!” (“A Lit-

11 Berlin Cabaret Songs, performed by Ute Lemper, Decca Records, CD, 1996.
“Mir is heut so nach Tamerlan!”

Words by Kurt Tucholsky
Music by Rudolf Nelson

Tamerlan war Herzog der Kirgisen und jeder Mensch in Asien wusste wohl das.
Tamerlan ritt unter grünen Wässern und wo der Jungfruchharz wuchs, wuchs kein Gras.
Und alle Farnen knuspen aussen vor ihrem Schritt, und fletschte die Mantel schleife mit
War er auch stets zu einem kleinen Kümpel bereit, das war in Asien eine schöne Zeit.
Mir is heut so nach Tamerlan nach Tamerlan wart.
Ein kleines bisschen Tamerlan, ja Tamerlan war.
Es war ewig, je mehr das, je mehr mich das, je mehr das, mich je mehr das, je mehr das. Ich glaubte es, es passiert was, passiert was, es war nicht mehr.
Mir is heut so nach Tamerlan nach Tamerlan wart.
Ein kleines bisschen Tamerlan ja Tamerlan wart.
Und sehe ich ins Publikum da liegt auch ein Fünfdrittel.
Auch Menschen geh mir weg.
Es hat ja nur Zweck mit dem Tamerlan.

“A Little Attilla”

English translation by Jacek Spiegel

Little Attilla was the Duke of the Kirghisian, famous throughout Asia.
Tamerlan role over green turansaw and where he stopped, grew no longer grass.
And all the women listened, fearful of his steps, Where the woman fell, the girl fell too.
He was always ready for a savage fight,
That meant a nice time in Asia.
Mir is heut so nach Tamerlan nach Tamerlan wart.
Ein kleines bisschen Tamerlan, ja Tamerlan war.
Es konnte passieren – ich war, ich war, ich war.
Mir is heut so nach Tamerlan nach Tamerlan wart.
Ein kleines bisschen Tamerlan ja Tamerlan wart.
Und sehe ich ins Publikum da liegt auch ein Fünfdrittel.
Auch Menschen geh mir weg.
Es hat ja nur Zweck mit dem Tamerlan.
"SEERÄUBER JENNY"

History

Die Dreigroschenoper (The Threepenny Opera) opened at Berlin’s Theater am Schiffbauerdamm on August 3 of 1928. The playbill classified the work as “a play with music in one prelude and 8 scenes.” Modeled after John Gay’s ballad opera The Beggar’s Opera, renowned dramatist Bertold Brecht penned the adaptation while composer Kurt Weill wrote the music.

Die Dreigroschenoper, set in London in 1730, tells the tale of a business man, Johnathan Peachum, who discovers that his daughter Polly is romantically involved with notorious gang leader Mac the Knife. In Brecht’s own narration for Die Dreigroschenoper, he describes the scene that sets up “Seeräuber Jenny”:

“…Mac is not happy with the work of his gang. It’s the work of apprentices, not of grown men. To clear the air and liven things up a little, Polly volunteers to sing a song.”

The song itself tells the story of a wash-girl at a hotel, who after enduring the abuse or indifference of customers, turns out to be the leader of a band of pirates and has her whole town massacred as revenge. The full text and translation is reprinted in Figure 12.

Analytical Comparison to Kabarett Style

In terms of lyrical content, “Seeräuber Jenny” differs from Kabarett style because it is part of a larger work, related to an overarching plot. Kabarett songs tended to be stand-alone; they did not belong to a collection or a larger plot. In the case of “Seeräuber Jenny,” while the piece can exist on its own, telling a complete story, it was intended to be just one of 21 pieces in a multi-act play with music.

Die Dreigroschenoper carries with it certain topical aspects to German culture of the time. The play, which centers around a lawless gang and their ruthless leader, discusses corruption and the evilness of mankind. “Seeräuber Jenny” to a certain extent reaffirms these themes, but as part of a different story. “Seeräuber Jenny” is simply a song that Polly sings to distract Mac from his rage of his gang’s ineptitude; the song has no direct bearing on the larger plot of Die Dreigroschenoper, functioning as a sort of story-within-a-story. Since the premiere of Die Dreigroschenoper, “Seeräuber Jenny” has gained popularity as an individual piece. Textually, “Seeräuber Jenny” lacks the topicality of Kabarett style.

The form of “Seeräuber Jenny” closely resembles...
that of a Kabarett song. The piece has a verse section and a chorus. As Figure 13 illustrates, the verse section is divided into two parts, A and B. A and B are differentiated by their keys; A is in C minor, while B is in Eb minor. The chorus stays entirely in the key of B minor. Of the three verses, the second is a literal repetition of the first; only the third differs with a slower tempo and a slightly different conclusion.

Another example of Kabarett style’s influence on “Seeräuber Jenny” can be found in the oscillation on scale degree 5 in the bass in measures 3-9 of section A. See Figure 14. In this case, G, scale degree 5 of C minor, sounds on every upbeat. This oscillation lasts for the first six measures of the first and second verse, creating a heavy emphasis on G in the listener’s ear. For the duration of the piece, a fifth above the root of the bass sounds on the upbeats, but as clear tonal centers become harder to discern, the fifth being heard is no longer scale degree 5 of the key.

While all parts work together harmoniously in Kabarett songs, in “Seeräuber Jenny” the vocal, treble accompaniment, and bass accompaniment parts all work independently of each other in a harmonic sense. The two accompaniment voices in particular more often oppose each other than complement one another (Figure 15). In each of these examples, the bass outlines one tonal center while the treble plays another. In measures 6-8, the bass tonal center is while the treble focuses around C#. Measure 9’s bass has Ab as its center and the treble has Eb. The bass in measures 15 and 17 centers on Db while the treble emphasizes Eb. In measures 16 and 18, the tonal centers are F# in the bass and B in the treble. Each measure contains a polychord; the two distinctly different harmonies work together but contain dissonances.

The vocal part of the verse sections moves independently from the accompaniment. Firstly, as noted in Figure 16, the opening measure of the verse contains an A-natural. Because the key of C minor was so clearly established in the accompaniment’s introduction, Weill even includes a courtesy natural sign to assuage players’ concerns that this is a typo.

The melody of the A section appears to be in G minor, the dominant key of the accompaniment’s C minor. Coinciding with a move in the treble accompaniment to Eb minor, the voice moves to Bb minor in measure 9. See Figure 17.

In the B section, the tonal center of the vocal part
changes frequently. As Figure 18 shows, lyrically, measures can be grouped in couples, and musically, every two measures complement each other. In the first and second instances, the main sonority of the first measure of the pair, Bb, gives way by half step to the main sonority of the second measure, B. In the third example, B is the main sonority. Finally, the fourth example centers on G.

Like Kabarett songs, the relation between the text and the melody is very regular with obvious correlations between rhyme scheme and phrasing. Refer to Figure 13 for the form diagram. Each phrase ends as the lyrics reach the end of a line of poetry. However, Weill uses phrases containing an inconsistent number of measures to achieve this effect. See Figure 19. The verses contain four-measure, six-measure, and two-measure phrases to accommodate the poetry. The chorus section always lasts five measures, creating a jarring effect when the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse Section A, Phrase a</th>
<th>4 measures</th>
<th>“Meine Herrn… das Best für jeden”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verse Section A, Phrase b</td>
<td>6 measures</td>
<td>“und Sie geben… mit wem Sie reden”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verse Section A, Phrase b'</td>
<td>2 measures</td>
<td>“und Sie wissen nicht, mit wem Sie reden”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verse Section B, Phrase a</td>
<td>4 measures</td>
<td>“Aber einer Abend… das für ein Geschrei?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verse Section B, Phrase b</td>
<td>2 measures</td>
<td>“Und man wird mich lachen sehr bei meinen Gläsern”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verse Section B, Phrase c</td>
<td>2 measures</td>
<td>“und man sagt: ‘Was lächelt die dabei?”’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chorus Section</td>
<td>5 measures</td>
<td>“Und ein Schiff... wird liegen am Kai”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 19. Phrase lengths

music transitions back to the verse without completing the expected even number of measures.

In stark contrast to Kabarett’s well-defined keys and cadences, “Seeräuber Jenny” contains several tonic chords throughout the piece, but never offers a satisfying cadence in any of the keys expressed. Weill uses non-traditional harmonies and chord forms throughout to frustrate the sense of tonality. The song starts off in C minor (Figure 20). Because the C minor triad sounds for the first five measures, the listener gets a very clear sense that this sonority is tonic. However, the next chord throws in a C#, very obviously outside of C minor. By the ninth measure, the piece appears to have moved to an Eb minor triad in the right hand. See Figure 21. It is also at this point that that the bass starts to very clearly work against the right hand accompaniment. In contrast to the right hand, the bass emphasizes A in measure 8 and Ab in measure 9.

While it could be argued that an F half-diminished establishes a predominant with Eb minor as the new key, the real move to Eb minor does not occur until
As illustrated in Figure 22, Measures 11 through 14 act as a predominant to Eb. As an anacrusis to the B section which starts at measure 15, Bb resounds pointedly in open octaves, acting as a dominant and clearly marking a modulation. While Weill never gives the full Bb major chord, just the root is enough to satisfy the listeners’ need to hear a dominant function. The Eb minor triad returns at measure 15, the opening of the B section, as a tonic over a Db bass, but in the very next measure, a B minor chord undermines the tonic. While seemingly out-of-left-field, the B minor triad soon becomes important as the key of the chorus section. In the first two verses, the note B acts as a pedal point in the right hand from measure 18 until the end of the B section at measure 22. See Figure 23.

As Figure 24 shows, the final verse contains a slightly different conclusion of the B section. In measure 50, the final chord of the verse cannot be defined as any sort of conclusive tonal chord. With a B in the bass and a G#, C#, E, and F# in the treble, this cluster works better as a final pianissimo sigh to end the verse than as a cadential chord.

The chorus section has one unchanging tonal center, B. See Figure 25. It even cadences with a dominant chord, albeit one that is missing its third, A#. When the F# chord finally sounds, it turns out to simply be an open fifth. “Seeräuber Jenny” defies Kabarett style by avoiding complete cadences throughout its entirety.

Instead of building up the piece harmonically though tonic, predominant, and dominant like a Kabarett song, Weill builds up the piece through increasing and releasing dissonance. Figure 26 shows a harmonic reduction based on the treble accompaniment chords, the emphasized bass notes, and the notes of the vocal part which create structural harmonies.
CONCLUSION

Weill's Kabarett-influenced “Seeräuber Jenny” bears slight resemblance to the music from which it is derived. The differences outweigh the similarities, yet the piece still retains some essence of Kabarett style. In Kabarett style, texture is extremely important as a stylistic marker, especially the jump bass 1-5 oscillation. Weill does not always keep the oscillation to simply the tonic and fifth of the chord; he instead adds dissonances on the weak beats and/or set the oscillation in a different key than the voice or the treble accompaniment. Tonally, the voice, treble accompaniment, and bass accompaniment parts of “Seeräuber Jenny” work independently from one another in regards to harmony; on the other hand, in Kabarett, all parts work together harmoniously.

The textual content sets “Seeräuber Jenny” apart from its Kabarett counterparts. In Kabarett, the text is the fundamental part of each song, with blatantly biting lyrics dealing with social and political issues that were current to the audience. In “Seeräuber Jenny,” the meaning of the text is hidden behind a thick plot set in the 1700s. The story-within-a-story aspect of the piece further obscures its textual meaning. In Kabarett, however, the meanings of the songs were transparent, driving straight to the heart of German affairs with satire and scathing criticism. Further, Die Dreigroschenoper was created as a commercial venture intended for the mainstream German stage, while Kabarett songs were meant for small, underground clubs.

With its simple, catchy melodies and abrasive content, Kabarett made its way from the underground into the mainstream consciousness. Kurt Weill, a major composer, took its constituent parts and integrated them into the art music world. While “Seeräuber Jenny” cannot truly be classified Kabarett, it brings the essence of the musical form to an audience that otherwise may not have been aware of Kabarett music.

WORKS CITED

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