

# Marc Blitzstein

## *A Bio-Bibliography*

Leonard J. Lehrman

Bio-Bibliographies in Music, Number 99  
Don Hixon, Series Adviser

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PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut  
London

**Marc Blitzstein**



Marc Blitzstein at the piano in his apartment at 4 East 12<sup>th</sup> Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. *Photograph by John Jonas Gruen, © 1963. Courtesy of Stephen E. Davis.*

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## Biography & Scope Note

Marc Blitzstein (Mar. 2, 1905-Jan. 22, 1964) was one of the 20th century's most important American composers, lyricists and critics, often credited with having virtually invented opera in the American vernacular. Like Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein, both of whom were named in his will as (and became) musical advisors to his Estate, Blitzstein was a masterful pianist, coach and accompanist. Unlike them, he was not a conductor, and never became rich. Also unlike them, he made more money on the lyrics to one song ("Mack the Knife" from his adaptation/translation of Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, with music by Kurt Weill) than on everything else he ever did, put together, and he died at the age of 58, before, many have said, his time had come. Like the music of George Antheil (1900-1959), whom Blitzstein admired and whose criticisms he valued highly, very little of the music of Blitzstein was realized to its full potential during his lifetime, many pieces have not yet been performed as he conceived them, and much work needs to be done on and with his music--not least, putting some of the pieces in shape so that they *can* be performed.

Born into a progressive, secular Jewish family in Philadelphia, where his paternal grandmother ran the family bank that specialized in helping immigrants, he was quickly recognized as a musical talent (a "Wunderkind" or "brat prodigy," as he later put it) and given lessons with the best teachers available. Dropping out of the University of Pennsylvania after refusing "on principle" to attend the required gym classes, he became the first American piano student of Alexander Siloti and enrolled at the Curtis Institute of Music, studying harmony and counterpoint with Rosario Scalerò. He went on to Europe to study first with Nadia Boulanger in Paris (in 1926) and then Arnold Schönberg in Berlin (in 1927)--thus becoming the only composer to have worked in both of the opposing "camps" these two pedagogical giants represented.

Returning to the U.S., he continued to travel back and forth across the Atlantic, composing, lecturing, and reviewing for numerous publications (esp. *Modern Music*). His racy Whitman and Cummings settings were performed by Nelson Eddy and others. His satirical first opera, *Triple Sec* (1928), had a run as part of the Garrick Gaieties in New York in 1930. In 1931 the League of Composers commissioned *The Harpies*, but the one-act opera went unproduced for lack of funds, due to the Depression, until 1953. The premieres of his Piano Sonata, Percussion Music for the Piano (in which the lid was slammed several times), and Serenade for String Quartet in three movements, each marked "Largo," created minor scandals. Conductor Albert Coates almost brought him and his music to Russia, but plans fell through: the journal of a 1927 Russian trip by an M. Blitzstein, contained in the Blitzstein archives, seems to have been that of his stepmother, Madeleine (Leof) Blitzstein.

## 2 Biography & Scope Note

A turning point came when Blitzstein discovered "proletarian music," and became secretary of the Composers Collective of New York, applying his brilliant technical facility and iconoclastic tendencies toward creating works which culminated in his masterpiece, the play in music, *The Cradle Will Rock* (1936), followed by the allegorically autobiographical radio song play, *I've Got the Tune* (1937), and another labor opera, *No for an Answer* (1937-41). The latter, with its anti-war subtext, provoked the FBI to open a file on Blitzstein (kept open almost until his death, then reopened briefly thereafter), and was shelved after Germany invaded Russia in June 1941. (The FBI's attention may also have been attracted by his new prominence, as indicated by the fact that he was awarded Guggenheim fellowships in 1940 and 1941. In 1946, thanks to Aaron Copland's influence, he received an American Academy of Arts and Letters award. In 1959, on Virgil Thomson's nomination, he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.) *Cradle* became his most notorious, and most performed, work, and is considered a classic of socially conscious drama, as well as the precursor to *West Side Story*, *Dynamite Tonight*, *Casino Paradise*, *Urinetown* and others. The story of its stormy opening formed the basis for Tim Robbins' 1999 film, *Cradle Will Rock*.

Serving with the Eighth U.S. Army in London, Blitzstein penned numerous works in the war effort, the most highly acclaimed being his dramatic cantata, *The Airborne Symphony*, inspired in part by the genre of film scores (of which he wrote eight), and which would probably be more effective and better appreciated today were it to be cinematically realized, as originally envisioned. Leonard Bernstein conducted and recorded it (twice), having earlier been inspired by *Cradle*, which he conducted from the piano while a student at Harvard in 1939. In 1947 he conducted *Cradle's* orchestral premiere, and in 1952 the premiere of Blitzstein's *Threepenny Opera* adaptation at Brandeis University.

Blitzstein also worked with the choreographer Jerome Robbins, on an unproduced American-Soviet friendship musical called *Golopchik*, and a ballet on discrimination called *The Guests* (1946-49) that in many ways anticipated *West Side Story*. After Robbins named names before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1953, Blitzstein was never interested in working with him again.

Even more influential, musically, on *West Side Story* was *Regina* (1947-49), Blitzstein's Koussevitsky Foundation-commissioned musicalization of Lillian Hellman's play *The Little Foxes*. It ran for seven weeks as a two-act Broadway show, then found new life (in three acts) in the opera house four years later, going on to become one of the most performed American operas.

Less successful was Blitzstein's urban folk opera taking place in New York's Little Italy, *Reuben Reuben* (1951-55), written at the height of the anti-Communist McCarthy period, about the difficulties of communication and the triumph of love over them. Not even the love of so many for so much of the score could overcome the work's own difficulties of communicating clearly with its audience just what it was trying to say, and it opened and closed quickly in

Boston, never reaching New York. In his final years, Blitzstein was dismantling the score and re-developing parts of it (as he had with his earlier 3 ballets and his unproduced operas *Parabola and Circula* and *The Condemned*, the latter a choral opera inspired by the case of Sacco and Vanzetti) in his cantata *This Is the Garden*, and in the work he considered would be his magnum opus, the three-act opera *Sacco and Vanzetti*, commissioned by the Ford Foundation for the Metropolitan Opera in 1959.

First, though, there was a New York Philharmonic commission, conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos: *Lear: A Study* (1958), inspired in part by Blitzstein's incidental music for numerous Shakespeare plays (including two different productions of *King Lear*), and *Juno* (1957-59), a musical with a book by Joseph Stein based on Sean O'Casey's play *Juno and the Paycock*. The musical, which ran into directorial and production problems and lasted for only 16 performances on Broadway, has one of the most beautiful scores ever written for the musical stage, with lush orchestrations by Robert Russell Bennett and Hershy Kay, but still awaits a full, major revival. Blitzstein's second Brecht translation, *Mother Courage* (1957), ran into legal problems after Brecht's death, but is scheduled for a premiere in the summer of 2005.

In 1961, while working on *Sacco*, Blitzstein made a trip to Israel, which awakened in him reflections on his Jewish identity. Teaching at Bennington College in 1962-63, he befriended fellow faculty member Bernard Malamud and decided to take a "breather" from the Met commission, to compose a series of one-act operas to be called *Tales of Malamud*. He was completing the music for these, on a "working vacation" in Martinique, when he was beaten up and robbed by two Portuguese sailors and one local juvenile, who were later convicted of manslaughter: he died, in the hospital, of the wounds he had sustained.

There is still considerable controversy over what he was doing with those three sailors. For years it was theorized that he had engaged them in some sort of political argument, to which they had reacted violently. It is also possible he was trying to learn the music of their speech, in order to portray the character of the Portuguese immigrant, Celestino Madeiros, in *Sacco and Vanzetti*. But the most probable explanation is that he was looking for sex among "rough trade" and that they simply saw him as an easy prey for a robbery they hoped would go undetected.

As matters of sexuality, especially homosexuality, have been receiving greater and greater attention, so Blitzstein's personality (his rebelliousness and relentless self-criticism) and his sex life--particularly his marriage (1933-1936) to the bisexual writer and translator Eva Goldbeck (1901-1936) and the circumstances surrounding his death--have received more and more attention; often, it seems, to the (continued) neglect of his works.

#### 4 Biography & Scope Note

This book, which was announced by Greenwood Press twenty years ago, and was taken in hand by this writer ten years ago, is the first to focus primarily on the work(s), as completely and comprehensively as possible, limited only by the resources available, and the degree of cooperation and communication from the many performers and writers of and on Blitzstein and his works. Listings are current as per information received thru May 15, 2005. (A big thank-you to Praeger, for their faith and patience.) For reasons of space, materials on *The Threepenny Opera* (T9) have been limited to those concerning Blitzstein's direct involvement with the work or performances of portions of it on programs of his works. For similar reasons, selectivity had to be employed in listing the many performances of "I Wish It So" (W117I:1#1), reviews of the film *Cradle Will Rock* (W72.101), and the many writings on Orson Welles and Leonard Bernstein which mention Blitzstein; and the discography/videography does not include translations.

First, following a section on genealogy, including a selected list of Eva Goldbeck's works and lists of important performances by Blitzstein of others' works, there is a chronological listing of Blitzstein's own musical works, numbered W1-W128 (including 20 adapted, reconstructed, or completed by this writer) followed by a listing by genre: works with orchestra (46); chamber music works (14); piano solo works (27); film scores (8); incidental music for plays (13); ballets (10); pieces for revues (7); operas & musicals (17); choral works (22, including 76 individual pieces +8 posthumous arrangements); vocal quartets (10); vocal trios (12); vocal duets (47), vocal solos (189).

Then there is a chronological listing of the texts he wrote to others' music, numbered T1-T18, followed by an alphabetical index that cross-references all these items with all known alternate titles, and titles of individual movements and songs within larger works. Then comes an annotated list of Blitzstein's articles and other writings A1-A96; then general writings about Blitzstein written during his lifetime, G1-G65; memorials and death notices, M1-M44; and general writings about him written after his death P1-P63. Included therein are the seven commercial recordings (the two he made himself [A63 and A76] and the five made after his death [P31, P32, P38, P53, and P63 (in progress)]) and various concerts (for which there were printed programs), each containing three or more of his works.

An exception to this is the Nadia Boulanger memorial concerts (1996-2004), at which 3 Blitzstein works were performed, including W100 "War Song," which was premiered; they are listed under W100; not as a separate P entry. Another exception is Thomas Meglioranza's Grinnell College recital of 4/19/03, which came to light recently, and which is listed under the first of the 3 Blitzstein songs he sings, W66 "Stay in My Arms." The Blitzstein concert of 4/18/41, for which there was no printed program--only invitations and handwritten notes as to what was played--is listed under the individual works (W65-79).

General writings (about more than one work) of each individual are grouped together, connected by "see" or "see also" references to other writings by that individual that pertain to specific works. Except for the Piano Concerto (W52) and excerpts from *The Guests* (W116), none of the solo instrumental works have been commercially recorded; a series of concerts culminating in a recording of the (virtually) complete solo piano music in the fall of 2005 (not included in this book) will attempt to remedy that.

The major portion of the book provides an annotated list of documents pertaining to each individual work, including (chronologically) letters, sketches, performances, preview articles, reviews, analytical books and articles, recordings, and recording reviews. The key and range are given for each published song. Items in the earlier lists are cross-referenced by number when quoted in the section on individual works. The book concludes with a discography and videography of all known commercial and private recordings of Blitzstein's musical works (translations are not included), and an index of persons and organizations important in Blitzstein's life and work (authors whose works were reviewed by Eva Goldbeck but do not appear elsewhere in the book are not included; works by other composers are listed under those composers' names).

Gaps are acknowledged in performance histories of *The Cradle Will Rock* and *Regina* between 1964 and 1987, when Tams-Witmark's records became computerized. Some archival clippings are missing dates, or even name of publication, but may be identifiable in the future. The whereabouts, papers, and/or death dates of Madeleine Leof Blitzstein, Reed Wolcott, and Katya Brous may become known. Many previously unidentified texts and scores in the archives have now been identified, but a few remain mysteries; numerous lost scores and hitherto unknown private recordings may yet be found. Errors of proofreading are apologized for in advance.

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## Abbreviations Used

A = alto	Ctr = Center
AAA = American Agricultural Assn	Cym = Cymbal(s)
ABC = American Broadcasting Corp.	d/dim. = diminished
abr. = abridged	d. = died
Acc = accordion	dir. = director
accomp. = accompaniment	diss. = dissertation
/accompanying	div. = divorced
Admin. = Administration	dr. = drum
AFofM = American Federation of Musicians	e.g. = for example
AFTRA = American Federation of Television and Radio Artists	ed. = edition/edited by
aka = also known as	EH = English horn
alt. = alternative	encl. = enclosed
Amer = American	Eng. = English
APM = American Peace Mobilization	Ens = Ensemble
arr. = arranged/arrived	esp. = especially
Assn = Association	exc. = excerpt(s)
aug. = augmented	FBI = Federal Bureau of Investigation
b. = born	Fdn = Foundation
B = bass (voice) or box number	fl[.] = flute
BAC = Battersea Arts Ctr, London	Ft = Fort
Bar/bar. = baritone (voice)	FTP = Federal Theatre Project
BBC = British Broadcasting Corp.	gliss. = glissando
Bcl. = bass clarinet	Gov. = Governor
BD = bass drum	Guit = Guitar
bn[.] = bassoon	HH = hihat
c. = circa (approximately)	Hist = Historical
Cb = contrabass	HI = Hall
Cbn = contrabassoon	hn = French horn
CBS = Columbia Broadcasting System	hp = harp
Cel[.] = celesta	hpschd = harpsichord
cf. = Compare/See also	HUAC = House Un-American Activities Committee
choreog. = choreography	Hung. = Hungarian
CIO = Congress of Industrial Organizations	HW = Helene Williams
cl[.] = clarinet	Inc. = Incorporated
Comp = Comparative	incl. = including
compl. = complete/completed/completion	ISCM = International Society for Contemporary Music
cond. = conductor	LB = Leonard Bernstein
Corp. = Corporation	LC = Library of Congress
CP = Communist Party	Lg = League
CPers = CP members	Lit = Literature; lit. = literally
Cr = Crash	LJL = Leonard J. Lehrman
CRI = Composers Recordings, Inc.	Ltd. = Limited
Cto = Concerto	m. = married/measure;
	mm. = measure
	M/maj. = major; m/min. = minor
	M = mezzo-soprano

- MB = Marc Blitzstein  
 MBS x/y = Marc Blitzstein Songbook  
     vol.x pg.y  
 Met = Metropolitan Opera  
 MGM = Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer  
 M.I.T. = Massachusetts Institute of  
     Technology  
*MM* = *Modern Music*  
 MOMA = Museum of Modern Art  
*MtM* = *Mark the Music* (P19e)  
 mus.dir. = music director  
 mvt = movement  
 NAACP = National Association for  
     the Advancement of Colored People  
 Nat'l = National  
 NBC = National Broadcasting Corp.  
 n.d. = not dated/no date available  
 nr = near  
 NY = New York  
 NYC = New York City  
 NYCO = New York City Opera  
 NYPL = New York Public Library  
 NYU = New York University  
 ob[.] = oboe  
 op. = opus  
 opt. = optional  
 Orch = Orchestra  
 p. = page #(s)  
 P.D. = Public Domain  
 perc. = percussion  
 perf = performance; perf'd = performed  
 Phil = Philharmonic  
 Phila = Philadelphia  
 picc. = piccolo  
 pno = piano  
 prem. = premiere  
 prod. = production/producer  
 Prof. = Professor  
 prog = program  
 publ. = published/publisher  
 q.v. = which see  
 qn = quintet  
 qt = quartet  
     X:Y = Act X Scene Y; or Section & p. # (of, e.g., *NY Times*)  
 # = number of movement, or song in a group, or solo/ensemble within a scene  
     Pt = Part (of a through-composed scene)  
 WSHS = Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin,  
     Marc Blitzstein Archive
- R = microfilm reel #  
     (sometimes followed by frame #s)  
 ret'd = returned  
 repr. = reprise  
 rev. = revised  
 S/sop. = soprano  
 S&V = Sacco and Vanzetti  
 Sc. = Scene  
 SF = San Francisco  
 sig = signature  
 SnDr = snare drum  
 Soc = Society  
 Sp. = Spanish  
 Sq = Square  
 Str = String(s)  
 SUNY = State Univ. of NY  
 Sus = Suspended  
 Sym = Symphony  
 T/ten. = tenor  
 TAC = Theatre Arts Committee  
 tb = trombone  
 Tel. = Telephone  
 Thtr = Theatre/Theater  
 Timp = Timpani  
 Tmpl Blks = Temple Block  
 tpt = trumpet  
 tr. = translated/translation (by)  
 Tri = Triangle  
 Ukr. = Ukraine  
 Univ. = University  
 v. = volume  
 va = viola  
 Var = Variation(s)  
 vc = cello  
 vce = voice  
 Vibr = Vibraphon  
 vn = violin  
 w/ = with  
 Wash = Washington  
 WPA = Works Progress Admin.  
 Xyl = Xylophone  
 Y = Young Men's Hebrew Assn

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This book would not have been possible without the inspiration & encouragement of many people:

Elie Siegmeister (1909-1991), my teacher and mentor from 1960 until his death, who first introduced me to *The Cradle Will Rock*, and encouraged me to look at *I've Got the Tune* and *Idiots First*, recommending me to the Blitzstein Estate as the latter's possible completor. My orchestration of that opera, completed during Elie's final days in the hospital, where he died of a brain tumor, was dedicated to him.

Joan Peyser, whose intriguing 1966 article on Blitzstein, the first to mention his use of dodecaphony in *Idiots First*, helped whet my appetite for the task at hand.

Leonard Bernstein, whose inspiring visits to Harvard (first at Dunster House in Dec. 1969, then at the Music Department in the spring of 1970, and finally at Lowell House Dec. 5, 1970 for my production of *I've Got the Tune*, *The Harpies*, and his *Trouble in Tahiti*) encouraged all of us to realize of Blitzstein: "This was his time!" that should have been, and might yet be, if we all worked hard enough, together.

Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979), who lent her sympathetic and understanding ear to me in lengthy and detailed discussions, and analyses, of music by Blitzstein, and Lehrman, in the summer of 1969 at Fontainebleau, and in 1971-72 in Paris, where I was fortunate enough to get to study with her on a Fulbright French Government grant.

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The casts and staffs of various opera companies and grantors that have helped premiere my Blitzstein completions, esp. Paul Gibbons, Bill Castleman, David Wyatt, Ivor Francis, Rob Lawson, Carol Skinner, Nanette Hanslowe, Yvonne Parkes, Laurie Conrad, Karen Campbell (Ithaca Opera); Edward Crafts, Richard Duncan, Bill Ashby (Indiana U.); E. Randahl Hoey, Georgeanna Pappas, Morris White, Ronald Edwards, Charles Osborne, Stephen Colanti, Alan Glassman, Jon Benac, Natasha Lutov, Theodore Sieh (Bel Canto Opera); Richard Marshall, Patricia Heuermann, James Sergi, Mark Tobias, Rodney Miller, Nick Wuehrmann, Robert Osborne (Center for Contemporary Opera); Richard & Beth

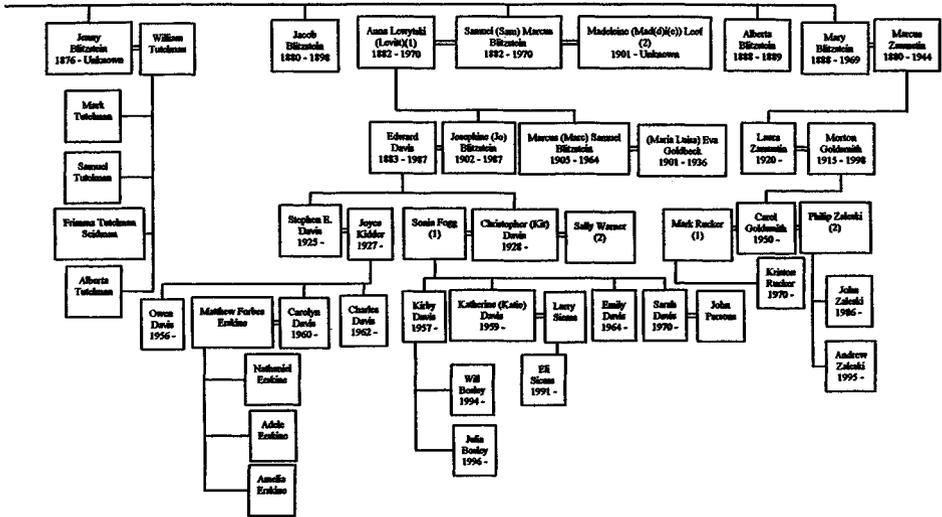
Flusser (After Dinner Opera); the Puffin Foundation, Brenda Lewis, Vincent Curcio, Donald Saddler, Leo Meyer, Gregory & Nicole Mercer, Lars Woodul, Stephen Tharp, Mark Wolff, Tara Venditti, Tammy Hensrud, Maurice Edwards, Luke DeLalio, Norman Greenspan, Benjamin Spierman (White Barn Theatre); Jonathan Irving, Joel Mandelbaum, the Maldeb Foundation, East End Arts Council, New York Foundation for the Arts, John Craven, Don Levine, Lorinda Lisitza, Cameron Smith, Josh Minkin, the Metropolitan Philharmonic Chorus, and Solidarity Singers of New Jersey (Great Neck House, People's Voice Cafe, and Queens College).

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Descendants of Shloyme Baumfeld

