



THE CAPITALISTIC MACHINE AGAINST A RADICAL INDIVIDUAL

A Consideration
of Marc Blitzstein's
Choral Opera,
The Condemned (1932)

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American composer Marc Blitzstein (1905–1964) spent much of 1932 planning and composing *The Condemned*, an ambitious “choral opera” for four choirs and full orchestra, inspired by the trial and execution of the anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. Almost ninety years later, the project, which Blitzstein considered his “best work” to date, has received little attention and still awaits its first performance.¹ The score remains unpublished, despite the enthusiasm of such supporters as Nadia Boulanger, and the composer’s own plans for performances in the Soviet Union and England failed to materialize. Even so, *The Condemned* occupies a unique position in Blitzstein’s output and in American choral music: it may be the most extensive socially-engaged choral work written by an American composer during the Great Depression, and its themes would continue to occupy Blitzstein’s imagination through the end of his life.²

“The Idea for the Opera Has Burst Upon Me”

Marc Blitzstein was one of America’s most gifted composers, and one of the most underappreciated.³ A brilliant pianist who studied composition at the Curtis Institute, and later in Europe with Nadia Boulanger and Arnold Schoenberg, his life and career were cut short by a tragic and untimely death.⁴ While he would later earn fame as one of America’s leading stage composers and lyricists through his celebrated musical theater masterpiece, *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937), and his successful adaptation of Kurt Weill’s *The Threepenny Opera* (1954), Blitzstein struggled in the late 1920s and early 1930s to make a mark. His one-act opera, *Triple-Sec* (1928), received 150 performances in 1930 as part of a theater revue; the sketch’s clever conceit, in which an increasingly inebriated audience perceives the action onstage, won Blitzstein some early admirers.⁵ But his successive attempts floundered. The esoteric *Parabola and Circula* (1929), in which a cast of characters with geometric names explores the complexities of various love relationships, never saw the stage. Blitzstein’s next work, the biblically themed ballet *Cain* (1930), faced a similar fate, with conductor Leopold Stokowski abandoning the project after only a few rehearsals.⁶ The composer’s send-up of mythology, *The Harpies* (1931), would wait over twenty years for a premiere, its commission withdrawn by the League of Composers due to financial problems. Two incomplete opera sketches of the same period, *The Traveling Salesman* and *The Killers*, did not proceed beyond the earliest planning stages.



Such mixed early results did not discourage Blitzstein. With one minor success and several near misses behind him, the composer sensed that he needed to write a new stage work: a choral opera.⁷ Blitzstein settled on the idea early on, noting simply in his sketchbook, “new opera—one act, 4 choruses (16 each), full orchestra.”⁸

Thematic inspiration came later, after Blitzstein set sail for France to visit his partner and future wife, the author Eva Goldbeck. While aboard the ship, the composer encountered a group of suspected communist deportees. Blitzstein, whose own progressive ideals and sympathy toward working-class concerns would later inspire him to join the Communist Party, jotted his thoughts in a letter to his sister, dated August 9, 1931: “The idea for the opera has burst upon me. It is, I say with confidence, a wow. Everything fits, and it is a great chance for me, although it does at the moment appear that only Soviet Russia would be willing to perform it.”⁹ Blitzstein elaborated the next day:

“What strikes me most about the idea I have for the new opera is the perfect way everything fits my original form....I note I have not yet told you the theme. It is a variation on Sacco-Vanzetti: the morning of the execution of a man convicted falsely of murder, with a background of the capitalistic machine against a radical individual. The man, his wife, the warden, and the priest are the characters, each played by a chorus.”¹⁰

Sacco and Vanzetti

While the idea of a choral opera represented a singular innovation on the part of Blitzstein, he was not alone among artists in recognizing the importance of the Sacco and Vanzetti trial as a watershed social event.¹¹ The armed robbery of a Boston-area shoe factory on the afternoon of April 15, 1920, set into motion a series of events that would later dominate headlines. During the heist, a pair of gunmen stole thousands of dollars of payroll money, killing two employees before fleeing the scene. Witnesses could not identify

the culprits, and authorities soon began trolling local Italian immigrants in hopes of catching the robbers. While not originally under investigation, Nicola Sacco (a shoe trimmer) and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (a fishmonger), themselves anarchists and associates of political dissidents from the Italian immigrant community, responded vaguely to questions regarding the robbery. A search during the interrogation revealed that both men carried handguns, hidden within their clothing. This aroused the suspicion of the authorities, who indicted Sacco and Vanzetti for the robbery and murders.

The trial commenced May 1921, with Judge Webster Thayer, a noted anti-anarchist, personally requesting to try the case. Defense attorney Fred Moore, a California socialist who raised the ire of Thayer for his political views and his constant grandstanding, represented Sacco and Vanzetti. As prosecutor Frederick Katzmann questioned the pair concerning their anarchist beliefs, Moore perceived the courtroom’s insurmountable prejudice. Choosing instead to emphasize the duo’s humanity, Moore’s defense depicted Sacco and Vanzetti as innocent immigrants on trial for their anarchist radicalism, rather than for the crime at hand.¹² His tactics made no impact on the jury who, after just a few hours of deliberation, found the pair guilty. Despite several appeals, multiple requests for a new trial, and the confession of a death-row inmate who claimed that the pair did not participate in the crime, the state executed Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927.¹³

The event has been described as “[haunting] the American political psyche, an anguished presence hovering above the nation’s conscience like an incubus at the witching hour.”¹⁴ Famous intellectuals, including Albert Einstein and H. G. Wells, voiced sympathy with Sacco and Vanzetti, and numerous groups condemned the trial’s outcome. As such, most on the political left saw the duo as “innocent dreamers,” working-class martyrs devoured by a rigged court system.¹⁵ Those sharing this view accepted a few key points: first, that the trial was motivated by prejudice against immigrants and political radicals; second, that the pair were actually innocent, the evidence having been planted by a corrupt prosecution; and finally, that Sacco and Vanzetti, as anarchists, would have sympathized with the larger world socialist and communist movements.¹⁶

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For all these reasons, the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti galvanized left-leaning artists and writers, including Ben Shahn, Upton Sinclair, John Dos Passos, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and numerous others.¹⁷ Many musicians, similarly moved, spent the subsequent decades mining the trial for inspiration. Composer Ruth Crawford wrote a song for piano and voice titled *Sacco, Vanzetti* (coincidentally in 1932, the same year Blitzstein completed *The Condemned*). Later, folk singers Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie wrote odes to Sacco and Vanzetti, and Joan Baez and Italian film composer Ennio Morricone collaborated on the music for Giuliano Montaldo's 1971 film, *Sacco & Vanzetti*. Blitzstein himself would return to the trial, again choosing the pair as the subjects for a final opera, left incomplete at his death.

Composing the Condemned

Inspired by his encounter with the communist deportees on the ship, Blitzstein proceeded to sketch out the plan for his opera. While naming the trial in his notes, *The Condemned* only refers implicitly to Sacco and Vanzetti. Instead, Blitzstein's first sketch of the plot begins with abstract philosophical ideas, stating that the chorus for each character should illustrate both "human qualities which are universal (not necessarily mass)" and "break-ups within the individual."¹⁸ In avoiding the traditional opera soloist, Blitzstein makes a seemingly obvious nod to Marxian communism, with the collective (a chorus) taking precedence over the individual (a soloist). But Blitzstein's approach reveals more nuance than this, and the reference to the fragmentation of the characters indicates the possible influence of Freud's psychoanalytic theories.

This points to a broader dramatic tension, as Marx is concerned with the materialistic action of history, while Freud's domain is the psychological; each chorus paradoxically serves as an external representation of an individual's internal struggle. Taken together, these contradictory juxtapositions (universal-individual, Marx-Freud, external-internal) along with the various groupings of characters throughout the opera (Wife-Condemned, Priest-Condemned, Friend-Condemned, Wife-Priest-Friend), invite a dialectical read-

ing. Viewed as a dialectic, each opposition, conflict, and contradiction becomes a catalyst, pointing toward the potential change and transformation of the Condemned himself, and of the world and those left behind after his death—a Marxian gesture.

Seeking to link Sacco and Vanzetti's cause with other revolutionary figures, Blitzstein listed some two dozen other characters as possible models.¹⁹ Individuals with obvious historical parallels appear, like Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, but so do others: Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx, Garibaldi, Eugene V. Debs, John Brown, Judas Maccabeus, Socrates, Dostoevsky. Like Sacco and Vanzetti, Blitzstein would have considered these historical figures as standing against tyranny and injustice, many paying with their lives.

Blitzstein's sketch then describes an image: at the rising of the curtain, the chorus lies "scattered about the stage in attitudes of sleep." The chorus, representing the accused, does not comprehend the situation, singing in polyphony, moving disparately. This choral character must then reach a decision, and an internal dialogue plays out between a chorus split in two: "one half 'for,' one half 'against'; the whole thing starting complexly and thinning and purifying down to an issue."²⁰ Already, Blitzstein presents some of the final product's most recognizable features.

This first sketch continues to describe the rest of the opera. While specifics would change, Blitzstein's burst of creative energy resulted in a recognizable draft storyline, the main characters represented by four sixteen-voice choirs. In the story, a prisoner (named John Joseph Helm in these early drafts) awakens on the morning of his execution. The warden brings in a priest, who attempts to console the prisoner; the prisoner will have none of it (Blitzstein would later replace the character of the warden with that of a friend, supportive of the prisoner's unnamed revolutionary cause). Following a momentary panic, the prisoner calls back the priest, repenting. After the priest leaves, the prisoner expresses regret for his decision, rejecting God and embracing atheism. The prisoner and his wife (Anna, and later Ariana, in the earliest sketches) exchange goodbyes as the warden takes the condemned to his death. After the wife sings of her grief, the priest "happily (not too) recites a sort of childish gloria...he did believe."²¹ The

earliest attempts at titling the work sound cryptic and ominous: *The Martyr*, *The Prisoner*, *Day, For One Dying*, *Ascent to Death*, *The Hour*, *The Last Hour*, *The Final Hour*, *Death Hour*.

Blitzstein halted work on the opera in the months following his return, focusing instead on other musical projects. His *Serenade* for string quartet featured three movements, all marked *Largo*; critics did not embrace the piece.²² He watched as plans for premieres of *Cain* and *The Harpies* disintegrated. His frustration with the current musical scene nearly overwhelming, he stated early in 1932 that he had become “impatient...to sense the germ of new greatness in a work.... the sound of new compositions no longer startles or shocks... It is a new individuality who is awaited...”²³

In June 1932, Blitzstein and Eva Goldbeck sought frugal accommodations abroad, settling first in the Croatian town of Dubrovnik, and later in Mlini. Here, the composer could focus on the opera without distraction, and Blitzstein worked rapidly, fleshing out the libretto within two weeks. Around this time, Blitzstein renamed the opera *The Dying*, and finally, *The Condemned*. While Eva noted in her extensive journals from the period that work and stress had put Blitzstein in a precarious psychological state, by July the composer had written most of the music.²⁴ Blitzstein finished the short score for the choral opera in August, and completed the orchestration and final conductor’s score by November 1932.

Musical Analysis

The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research houses the unpublished manuscripts for *The Condemned* within the Wisconsin Historical Society Archives. Numerous pages of draft notes exist in this archive, in addition to a complete piano reduction, an incomplete piano transcription, an unfinished conductor’s score, and two completed conductor’s scores.²⁵ Even at the earliest stages a fair amount of musical agreement exists between each of these drafts and scores, and a comparison of the two final conductor’s scores shows that Blitzstein completed his work by the end of 1932.

Blitzstein’s one-act opera takes place over eleven short scenes, approximately thirty-five minutes in total. The choral and orchestra forces are sweeping: two flutes, pic-

colo, two oboes, English horn, three B-flat clarinets, two A clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three C trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, drums, cymbals, harp, piano, full strings, and four choirs: TTBB (“The Condemned”), SSA (“The Wife”), BB (“The Friend”), and TT (“The Priest”). Blitzstein expanded the size of each choir to 48 singers by his final drafts, bringing the total choral forces to nearly 200—a massive undertaking. Perhaps inspired by Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre, or by the experimentation of Soviet directors like Vsevolod Meyerhold, Blitzstein imagined the four choirs on stage standing on a series of ramps, with members of the first choir (“The Condemned”) in various positions indicating sleep, or exhaustion, stirring themselves to attention by the end of the first scene.²⁶ Curtains would obscure the other choral characters (“The Wife,” “The Friend,” and “The Priest”), revealing each group for their scenes before hiding them again. The only other stage action given is the exit of the Condemned, at his execution in scene nine.

The libretto, written entirely by Blitzstein, contains none of the composer’s characteristic humor. Dark and brooding, it became more minimalistic with each revision. This may have been purposeful experimentation on the part of the Blitzstein, or possibly a decision intended to emphasize the philosophical weight of the subject matter. At any rate, the spare libretto lends the opera an air of abstraction and emotional distance, with short utterances communicating the claustrophobic anxiety of the prisoner.

Musically, Blitzstein’s choral opera is marked by neo-classical and contrapuntal techniques, with frequent and bold dissonance between chorus and orchestra. Harmonic clashes of seconds, fourths, and sevenths abound, and music historian Howard Pollack notes a variety of possible influences, mentioning similarities to the styles of Beethoven, Stravinsky, Bach, and Milhaud.²⁷ Table 1 presents the overall musical structure of the work, along with key lines from the libretto to aid in visualizing the opera.

An examination of the beginning of the opera illustrates the harmonic language that Blitzstein employs throughout *The Condemned*, revealing how he handles the opera’s various motives and themes. At the opening curtain, the Condemned awaits his execution, the

Table 1.

Scene	Characters	Duration	Tempo Indications	Libretto
1	The Condemned (TTBB)	116 measures	<i>Tempo moderato</i> (♩ = 56) – <i>Allegro</i> (♩ = 120) – <i>Maestoso</i> (♩ = 80)	The Condemned awakes from a dream and finds himself on death row: “This is the day I am to be killed!”
2	The Condemned, the Wife (SSA)	60 measures	<i>Andante</i> (♩ = 60)	The Condemned seeks to reassure his wife: “I need you to be strong, I must believe in hope.”
3	The Condemned, the Friend (BB)	76 measures	<i>Giusto</i> (♩ = 132) – <i>Con moto</i> (♩ = 116) – <i>Meno mosso</i> (♩ = 100)	The Friend consoles the Condemned: “You shall be our martyr. It is a glorious death.” The Condemned states: “I do not want to die.”
4	The Condemned, the Priest (TT)	90 measures	<i>Commodo</i> (♩ = 72)	The Priest seeks to comfort the Condemned, who rejects God.
5	The Condemned	91 measures	<i>Larghetto risoluto</i> (♩ = 66) – <i>Allegro non troppo</i> (♩ = 116) – <i>Tempo I°</i> (♩ = 66)	In a soliloquy, the Condemned states emphatically: “There is no God; there is only Man.” But he ends the movement expressing his fear of death.
6	The Condemned, the Wife, the Priest	192 measures	<i>Vivace</i> (♩ = 120) – <i>Adagio</i> (♩ = 63) – <i>Allegro</i> (♩ = 100) – <i>Più allegro</i> (♩ = 100) <i>Tempo di Vivace I°</i> (♩ = 120) – <i>Tranquillo</i>	Fearful, the Condemned calls back the Priest, who absolves him of his sins. The wife cries.
7	Instrumental tableau	33 measures	<i>Cantabile</i> (♩ = 60)	The Condemned rests, exhausted.
8	The Condemned	72 measures	<i>Lento Sostenuto</i> (♩ = 40)	The Condemned again denies God: “I need no heaven. The earth shall one day be enough. All men are my brothers.”
9	The Condemned, the Wife, the Friend	24 measures	♩ = 80 – ♩ = 112	The Condemned and the Wife exchange goodbyes.
10	The Wife	97 measures	<i>Grave</i> (♩ = 58) – <i>Allegro</i> (♩ = 88) – <i>Andante con moto</i> (♩ = 44) – <i>Strepitoso</i> (♩ = 144)	The Wife describes the execution: “He lies, beaten, slain by them! They murder him in cold blood!”
11	The Friend, the Wife, the Priest	147 measures	<i>Allegro assai</i> (♩ = 84) – <i>Largo</i> (♩ = 56) – <i>Tempo I°</i> – <i>Largo</i> (♩ = 56) – <i>Tranquillo</i> (♩ = 66)	The survivors find their own meaning in the death of the Condemned.

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choral singers positioned in varying states of exhaustion, representing his fractured state of mind. A soft trumpet and bassoon fanfare in D sounds, followed by an exposition of motives in succession, forming the basis for the movement's development. The most important musical idea, an ascending four-note scale taken up later as the chorus's main theme, appears first in the horn. A few elements already stand out: first, Blitzstein favors polytonality, the hint of D major at the outset being quickly denied by the strings and clarinets (Figure 1). These elements—clashing simultaneous thirds, polychords, modal mixture in the major and minor, and incidental augmented chords—are found throughout *The Condemned*, appearing again at the end of the first and last scenes. The harmonies call to mind the third movement of one

of Blitzstein's favorite works, Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* (1930).

Blitzstein uses his choral writing throughout the work to indicate the psychological state of his characters, as illustrated later in the scene. After the Condemned (choir I) sings his first entrance ("Awake"), the choir further develops the horn's ascending four-note scale in counterpoint.²⁸ An alternating two-note motive appears in the low strings (again, denying D major and implying the minor). The opposition of the low strings against the choir, and the contrapuntal writing, indicates the Condemned's disturbed state of mind: "Dream let go, will you never let go?" (Figure 2 on page 39).

Blitzstein continues with a tightly constructed exploration of these themes, possibly influenced by the style

The musical score for Figure 1 is a page from a score for Marc Blitzstein's *The Condemned*, Scene 1, measures 6-15. It features a variety of instruments: Flute (Fl.), Bass Clarinet (B♭ Cl.), Clarinet in B♭ (B. Cl.), Bassoon (Bsns.), Contrabassoon (Cbsn.), Horn in F (Hn. in F), Trumpets (C Tpts.), Violin 2 (Vln. 2), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vlc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The key signature is D major (one sharp), and the time signature is 6/8. The score is marked with a circled '1' above the horn part, indicating a first solo. Dynamics include *p* (piano), *pp* (pianissimo), *mp* (mezzo-piano), and *poco cresc.* (poco crescendo). Articulations include *pizz.* (pizzicato) and *arco* (arco). The score shows a complex texture with overlapping lines and some polytonality.

Figure 1. Marc Blitzstein, *The Condemned*, Scene 1, mm. 6–15.
Second fanfare and exposition of themes

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18 ③ *pp*

T1 A - - wake

T2 A - - wake

B1 A - - wake *p* Dream let

B2 A - - wake *p* Dream let go let go

Vlc. *p*

Cb. *p*

23 ④ *mp cresc.*

T1

T2 *cresc. poco a poco* Dream let go

B1 go let go, Dream will you ne - ver let go? Dream let go let

B2 *cresc. poco a poco* Dream let go let go, Dream will you ne - ver let go? Dream let go let

Vlc. *cresc. poco a poco*

Cb. *cresc. poco a poco*

28 *mf cresc.* *p sub.*

T1 Dream let go Dream will you ne - ver let go?

T2 let go Dream let go Dream will you ne - ver let go?

B1 go let go Dream will you ne - ver let go?

B2 go let go Dream will you ne - ver let go?

Vlc. *p sub.*

Cb. *p sub.*

Figure 2. Marc Blitzstein, *The Condemned*, Scene 1, mm. 18–31.
Chorus and violoncello and contrabass parts only

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of his teacher, Arnold Schoenberg. An example of Blitzstein's contrapuntal skill occurs later in the scene, as he inverts both the four-note scale and the low string counter-motive (Figure 3). The scene ends with an unresolved polychord.

The next few scenes introduce the rest of the cast: the Wife (choir II, scene 2), the Friend (choir III, scene 3), and the Priest (choir IV, scene 4). Of note here is Blitzstein's continued use of musical language to illustrate these characters. The Wife's entrances, for example, are

often paired with a lyrical and intimate theme, played by oboe (Figure 4 on page 41).

The Condemned and the Wife share words of comfort, sung contrapuntally by choirs I and II, their cadence on the unison at the conclusion of the scene suggesting an emotional union between the characters. The choral writing here shows the influence of Blitzstein's studies in the music of the Renaissance, albeit with highly modern harmonic language (Figure 5 on page 41).

The Wife's music contrasts greatly with that of the

50 *mp*
 T1: Soon be day, soon be day, What is it, what? What is it soon be
 T2: What is it, what is it? Soon be
 B1: What is it, what?
 B2: What
 Vlc. Cb.: [Instrumental accompaniment]

56 *p*
 T1: day what is it day? Let go, let go, will you ne - ver let go?
 T2: day what is it day? Let go, let go, will you ne - ver let go?
 B1: Soon be day what is it, what? Let go, let go, will you ne - ver let go?
 B2: is it, what? Soon be day, let go, will you ne - ver let go?
 Vlc. Cb.: [Instrumental accompaniment]

Figure 3. Marc Blitzstein, *The Condemned*, Scene 1, mm. 50–63.
 Chorus and contrabass parts only

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Musical score for Oboe, "Wife's theme". The score is in 4/4 time and consists of two staves. The first staff begins with a first ending (1.) marked *p legato* and a second ending (+2.) marked *p*. The second staff begins with a measure number of 5 and a first ending (1.).

Figure 4. Marc Blitzstein, *The Condemned*, Scene 2, mm. 1 – 8.
Oboe, "Wife's theme"

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Musical score for Chorus II (The Wife) and Chorus I (The Condemned). The score is in 4/4 time and consists of four staves: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The first two staves are for Chorus II (The Wife) and the last two are for Chorus I (The Condemned). The lyrics are: "There may be hope I must believe in hope, I am not strong I can not give up" and "Do not think that be strong".

Musical score for Chorus parts only. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of four staves: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The lyrics are: "Hope is all I have, is all I have I must believe in hope." and "Do not think that Try to be strong I need you to be strong".

Figure 5. Marc Blitzstein, *The Condemned*, Scene 2, mm. 50 – 61.
Choral parts only

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Friend (choir III), an ally of the Condemned who is filled with hatred for the oppressive system that would execute his comrade, a radical. The declamatory character of the Friend's opening statements (both orchestra and chorus will continue the sixteenth-note rhythmic pattern throughout the movement), along with the angular melody, indicates his impetuosity (Figure 6).

The Priest's music is perhaps the most sardonic and biting. A single timpani strike sounds at the rising of the Priest's curtain, followed by a bassoon duet in thirds above a ground bass, all in compound meter, combining elements of the Baroque *pastorale* and *passacaglia*. The Priest also sings in thirds, a contrast to the more dissonant choral writing of the rest of the work; this only adds to the scene's Baroque flavor (Figure 7 on page 43). These allusions, recalling the sacred style of Bach, are notable: Blitzstein would use Bach's music in *The Cradle Will Rock* for the character of the preacher, Reverend Salvation, indicating that the composer's

experimentation here would bear later fruit. The Condemned denies the Priest's offer of repentance. A cymbal crashes, and the Priest disappears.

The next scenes explore the tensions between these characters, showing the Condemned moving from resignation into doubt. After stating in scene five that he "believe[s] in Man" and that "there is no God," the Condemned is seized by fear. He calls back for the Priest in scene six, pleading for forgiveness. The Wife then appears, her weeping represented by a textless vocalise, accompanied by a flourish of triplets in the strings. The Condemned declaims his desperate plea in rapid eighth notes ("Save me Father"), simultaneously singing a sustained countermelody ("Lord I believe"), a sort of *cantus firmus*. The Wife interrupts the scene several times with her cries as the Priest intones the absolution ("Ego absolve te..."). This remarkable moment weaves the choral styles of all three of these characters together, illustrating the dramatic potential of the op-

The image displays a musical score for the character Giusto. It consists of three systems of music. The first system is for the vocal line, marked with a tempo of *Giusto* (♩ = 132) and a dynamic of *mf*. It begins with a triplet of eighth notes. The lyrics are: "We have reached the end, the end, the last hope fails, the end. There is no hope." The second system is for the piano accompaniment, also marked *mf*. It features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth notes. The third system is for the vocal line, marked with a tempo of *Giusto* (♩ = 132) and a dynamic of *mf*. It begins with a triplet of eighth notes. The lyrics are: "We are bea-ten, bea-ten. We are bea-ten. Here the last hope fails." The piano accompaniment continues with a similar rhythmic pattern.

Figure 6. Marc Blitzstein, *The Condemned*, Scene 3, mm. 3–13.

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era (Figure 8 on page 44). At the end of the scene, the Condemned again asks to be saved, a gesture of resignation; the accompanying strings, sounding a dissonant B-flat and finally a C underneath the chorus, foreshadow the Condemned's doubt and rejection of salvation.

The final scenes (7 – 11) reveal the ultimate themes of the opera, containing the last philosophical and musical statements from each of the characters. A brief and soft instrumental tableau, indicating a temporary peace, serves as a respite from the turmoil of the

The musical score for Figure 7 consists of several staves. At the top, there are two staves for instruments: 'Bsns. 1 & 2, Soli' and 'Vlc.'. The 'Bsns.' staff starts at measure 11 with a forte (*f*) dynamic and features a complex, dissonant texture. The 'Vlc.' staff starts at measure 18 with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a 'poco' marking, then moves to mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamics. Below these are two vocal staves, T1 and T2, for 'Choir III (The Priest)'. Both vocal parts sing the lyrics: 'My son your time has come. Will you not give yourself to God? To God in His mercy, to God in His mercy'. The vocal lines are accompanied by 'Horns' and a string part. The 'Horns' part starts at measure 18 with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a 'con sord.' marking. The string part starts at measure 24 with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and a 'Vla.' marking. The score concludes at measure 28.

Figure 7. Marc Blitzstein, *The Condemned*, Scene 3, mm. 11 – 28.

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previous action. Realizing his error, the Condemned stirs, reaffirming his humanist beliefs in his strongest statement yet: "Wrong. Weak. I deny the Father. I want only brothers. The earth shall one day be enough. All men are my brothers." The sustained choral writing here, homophonic with fully-fleshed harmonies, contrasts with the fragmented quality of the earlier scenes—finally, the Condemned has found peace through his resolve. The last statement of the chorus in this scene ("I shall die content") features a descending four-note motive stated by each of the voices, answering the very first theme of the Condemned, the ascending four-note scale on "Dream, let go." Recognizing that his struggle and persecution was born of a selfless love for humankind, the Condemned finally accepts his fate.

This wife and husband say goodbye to one another in the ninth scene, a short, intimate moment: "Remember to be strong." A solo contrabassoon signals the exit of the Condemned, who goes to his death. A long pause follows, and the Wife then describes her husband's execution in grim detail, singing at first slowly, increasing speed as she continues:

Gone—he is gone! Suddenly gone
He was here—I saw him; I heard him speak
to me;
and now he goes to die!
And I will never see him again!
Up the steps they lead him; he goes without
a whisper;
they take him to the death room! They hold
him,
They tie him, they bind him, then—strike
him down!
He falls, he is gone!

The Wife sings her narration clearly and percussively. A sustained lament—a wordless, contrapuntal vocalise—interrupts this speech, a moment for the Wife to sob as words fail her. The writing here, again, reveals the influence of earlier choral styles, and Blitzstein includes very specific instructions for phrasing and articulation. (Figure 9 on page 46).

The Friend, the Wife, and the Priest find themselves again in opposition, each one perceiving a dif-

ferent meaning in the execution of the Condemned. The Friend berates the political system for his friend's death: "Curse the nation which killed him, O curse the murderers.... His death shall not be in vain. His name shall be a banner; we will remember the glory of his life and the glory of his death." The Wife interrupts him, saying: "I give him up to glory." The Friend continues his tirade unabated, seemingly unaware of the Wife's cries, as the Priest joins in, singing: "He did believe, he did believe. There shall be joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth. Glory!" This material leads to a dramatic coda, the last moment of the opera, each character singing their variation on the word "glory." The opera ends with a polytonal, unresolved chord, implying ambivalence toward this lionization of the Condemned.

Missed Opportunities

Blitzstein had high hopes for *The Condemned*, and he received some encouragement from fellow musicians. In July 1932, he sent the eighth scene of the opera to Nadia Boulanger, hoping to receive constructive musical criticism from the discerning eye of his former teacher.²⁹ Boulanger reacted with enthusiasm, writing: "I received your manuscript ... I read with great care, great emotion the scene you sent me. I love it in itself deeply and feel that it must take the right place in the whole!" Anticipating some problems, she continued: "I don't realize what is the proportion of the orchestra, the distance in range and some places stay uncertain—in some chords where the voices seem not to be sustained by the orchestra, I would fear 'pour la justesse' [for the intonation]." However, she spent little time on the negative, praising the spirit of the piece: "These things are [a] matter of detail—what matters is the quality of the music, the strength of expression, the choice of means."³⁰ Likewise, the German composer Hanns Eisler, also a student of Schoenberg's and a frequent Brecht collaborator, called *The Condemned* "a work of extraordinary quality."³¹ Aaron Copland was more circumspect, saying that the opera was too abstract and difficult to appreciate: "music one has to respect rather than love."³² For his part, Blitzstein considered the opera a musical turning point, noting that while the piece

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features a “narrow, hemmed-in formula, doggedly regular; the harmonies mostly bleak, hollow, underdone, occasionally passionate,” the “open quality in the vertical line, and closed one in the horizontal” gave the work a “special and personal character.”³³

From the beginning, Blitzstein dreamed that the work would find a home in the Soviet Union. With the

help of a former teacher, Alexander Siloti, Blitzstein managed to arrange a meeting with the Russian-born English conductor, Albert Coates. Coates had important contacts with the musical establishment in the Soviet Union, conducting at the Bolshoi and heading up efforts to unite the nation’s orchestras under a single artistic leadership. In September, before the opera

49 *Andante con moto* (♩ = ca. 44)

p legato *cresc.* *dim.*

S1 Ah (vocalise)

p legato *cresc.* *dim.*

S2 Ah (vocalise)

p legato *cresc.* *dim.*

A Ah (vocalise)

52 *N.B.

S1

S2

A

56 *cresc.* *pochiss. rit.* *dim.* *a tempo* *p* *cresc.* *dim.* *pp*

S1

cresc. *dim.* *p* *cresc.* *dim.* *pp*

S2

cresc. *dim.* *p* *cresc.* *dim.* *pp*

A

*N.B. Aside from rests and indicated breathing places, phrase at will, keeping the effect of a continuous *legato*. If two repeated notes (marked ♩), take the second with a slight aspirate – not a full new breath.

Figure 9. Marc Blitzstein, *The Condemned*, Scene 10, mm. 49–59.

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A Consideration of Marc Blitzstein's Choral Opera, *The Condemned* (1932)

was complete, news came that the conductor desired to meet Blitzstein. After meeting Coates and his wife, Blitzstein sent word to Eva: "Triumph. Coates says utterly original. Russia will invite me to demonstrate. Meyerhold probable regisseur."³⁴ Blitzstein took extensive notes of his meeting, and Coates's comments seemed to all but guarantee a Soviet performance of *The Condemned*: "I will tell them in Moscow that this is a very, very important work, and one which should appeal to all of us.... utterly original" (although he added that the texture seemed "monotonous" at times, and the opera could use "a bit of variety"). Coates thought the Soviet Union would pay for Blitzstein's living expenses and his return fare. Overjoyed, the composer felt this moment to be "a turning point in the business of 'career.'"³⁵

It was not to be. Blitzstein planned for his trip and contacted Coates again after finishing the opera, but he received no response. He would learn disturbing news in a conversation with Prokofiev: Albert Coates had broken his association with the Russians. Blitzstein, in desperation, attempted to reach Coates again, to no avail. After briefly considering making a trip to Russia anyway, he wrote to Eva in January 1933 that he had given up all hopes for a Soviet performance of *The Condemned*.

The harshness of the work, with its dissonance and lack of conventional beauty (the chorus receives almost no harmonic support from the orchestra), along with the forces required to pull it off, proved insurmountable obstacles in Blitzstein's last attempts to perform the composition, as evidenced by a rejection letter sent from the BBC early in 1935.³⁶ Of course, the cost to mount even a single production of the work would have been substantial, requiring hundreds of performers for only thirty-five minutes of music—difficult under any circumstances, but especially during the extreme economic turmoil of the Great Depression. Shards of the composition would appear in later compositions, but no audience would ever hear Blitzstein's choral opera.

Conclusion

Given this history, does *The Condemned* deserve a hearing today? Yes. To be sure, musicians approaching the score for the first time would probably agree with Copland's assessment: Blitzstein's musical craft is exemplary, particularly his contrapuntal writing, but it is a hard work to embrace. The uncompromising theme and singularly dark musical character throughout would surely make this choral opera a challenge for both the audience and the performers. And, to Boulanger's concern ("pour la justesse"), the lack of support from the orchestra would require a large group of very skilled, independent choral singers. But a sensitive reading and a sympathetic audience would find more: the score exudes an earnestness and a sincerity that speaks to Blitzstein's own political and social convictions, and today's listeners might find the themes unexpectedly resonant and timely. As indicated by the enthusiasm of Boulanger and Eisler, *The Condemned* contains several moments of high drama and musical inspiration, many of the key scenes and staging concepts impossible to visualize without seeing them performed onstage. And, as mentioned at the outset, it is possibly the most extensive choral work on the topic of political persecution from the Great Depression—the very idea of a "choral opera," particularly on such charged political and social themes, is unique and enigmatic.

The Condemned occupies a singular historical place in Blitzstein's output, immediately preceding his most enduring work, *The Cradle Will Rock*. Eva Goldbeck, always an ardent supporter of this choral opera, observed that the "characteristic greatness of Blitzstein's music" had here reached its zenith, noting "its universally available combination of monumentality and drama; its individual statement of human elements; its purity, depth, and concentration of spirit; above all, its complete musicality." Most presciently, she felt sure that Blitzstein's best work lay ahead: "it suggests... that at some time Blitzstein will write a great comic work in music stemming directly out of this great tragic work."³⁷ After having plumbed enormous depths in this abstract, psychological drama, exhausting his inspiration in the process, Blitzstein's next stage work would do just that, providing him with the success and fame he had wished for *The Condemned*. In fact, one

could argue that this unknown choral opera's vision of "the capitalistic machine against a radical individual" inspired all of Blitzstein's music and politics through the 1930s and beyond. If so, *The Cradle Will Rock*, in which a radical union member does manage to stand up against the "capitalistic machine," could be considered a more successful implementation of the basic theme of *The Condemned*, the flower that would blossom from this root. ■

NOTES

- ¹ Marc Blitzstein (MB), letter to Josephine Blitzstein Davis (JBD), 16 October 1932. This and all letters quoted are from the Marc Blitzstein Papers collection, housed in the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, part of the Wisconsin Historical Society Archives in Madison. Blitzstein used bits of *The Condemned* as source material for later works, but the choral opera as originally conceived has never been performed. All Blitzstein quotations are reprinted with the permission of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, New York. All rights reserved.
- ² Some European works invite comparison, although Blitzstein's choral opera precedes them all. Hanns Eisler would write the Communist-themed oratorio *Die Mutter* in 1935, which features substantial music for chorus, and concern for the Jewish situation in Germany inspired Michael Tippett's *A Child of Our Time* (1939-1941), which would also use choral music to great effect.
- ³ Biographies available include Howard Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein: His Life, His Work, His World* (New York: Oxford, 2012) and Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989). Gordon's was the first full-length treatment of Blitzstein's life; Pollack's masterful biography may be considered the most definitive to date. Blitzstein's protégé and friend, Leonard Bernstein, was a tireless advocate of his music, and in the choral world Blitzstein would collaborate closely with Robert Shaw in *The Airborne Symphony* (1946). Edward Albee, the Broadway playwright, believed Blitzstein "sadly neglected." A treatment of another little-known Blitzstein work has appeared previously in the *Choral Journal*: see Justin Smith, "Grand Oratorio with a Social Conscience: Marc Blitzstein's 'This Is the Garden (1957)'.⁴" *Choral Journal* 49, no. 8 (2009): 32-47.
- ⁴ Blitzstein was the victim of a gay-bashing incident in Martinique, in which he was lured into an alley under false sexual pretenses and badly beaten by three sailors he met in a bar. He would soon die of his injuries. See Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein*, 468-9, 496-7.
- ⁵ Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 60.
- ⁶ MB, notes on Cain, 1931. The ballet would wait nearly ninety years for its premiere, which finally occurred in 2019.
- ⁷ MB, notes, 1931 (R6#242 in the Marc Blitzstein Papers, microfilm).
- ⁸ MB, notes, 1931 (R44#59). The chronology here indicates that the idea of a choral opera may have preceded his decision to take Sacco and Vanzetti as a thematic subject.
- ⁹ MB, letter to JBD, 9 August 1931 (R2#946).
- ¹⁰ MB, letter to JBD, 10 August 1931 (R2#953-4).
- ¹¹ See Paul Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991); John F. Neville, *Twentieth-Century Cause Célèbre: Sacco, Vanzetti, and the Press, 1920-1927* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004); David Felix, *Protest: Sacco-Vanzetti and the Intellectuals* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1965); William Young and David E. Kaiser, *Postmortem: New Evidence in the Case of Sacco and Vanzetti* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985); and Douglas Linder, "The Sacco and Vanzetti Trial," *Famous American Trials*, <https://famous-trials.com/saccovanzetti>.
- ¹² Felix, *Protest*, 54.
- ¹³ Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein*, 134-5.
- ¹⁴ Neville, *Twentieth-Century*, 151-2.
- ¹⁵ Avrich, *Anarchist Background*, 56-7.
- ¹⁶ Neville, *Twentieth-Century*, 36-7. While there is still no consensus on the innocence or guilt of Sacco and Vanzetti, many historians agree that they should have at least been granted a second trial.
- ¹⁷ Carolyn West Pace, "Sacco and Vanzetti in American Art and Music" (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1997), 37.
- ¹⁸ MB, "Sketch for a one-act opera" (R44#59).
- ¹⁹ MB, character list (R44#144-5).
- ²⁰ MB, sketch (R44#59).
- ²¹ MB, sketch (R44#60-1).
- ²² Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 74-5.

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- ²³ Marc Blitzstein, "Tame Season in New York," *Modern Music* 9:2 (Jan-Feb 1932), 79.
- ²⁴ Eva Goldbeck's (EG) journals document this period in great detail.
- ²⁵ Marc Blitzstein, music for *The Condemned*, Marc Blitzstein Papers, microfilm, R44F164-210 (early piano version), R44F211-270 (incomplete piano-vocal transcription and various musical sketches), R44F271-334 (incomplete conductor's score draft), R44F335-547 (conductor's score #1), and R44F548-746 (conductor's score #2).
- ²⁶ Blitzstein's production notes are referenced here. For more about Brecht and Meyerhold's theatrical innovations, see Katherine Bliss Eaton, *The Theater of Meyerhold and Brecht*, Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, ed. Joseph Donohue, no. 19 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), 9. Brecht's theories with regard to representing the Marxian materialist dialectic through dramatic means may also have influenced Blitzstein's decision to illustrate the individual as a choir, a point taken up earlier in this essay.
- ²⁷ Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein*, 137
- ²⁸ This moment again calls to mind the third movement of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*.
- ²⁹ Part of the Nadia Boulanger Collection at Harvard University.
- ³⁰ Nadia Boulanger, letter to Marc Blitzstein, 31 July 1932.
- ³¹ Quoted in Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein*, 106, also see 140.
- ³² Quoted in Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein*, 139.
- ³³ MB, letter to JBD, 29 October 1932 (R2#1227).
- ³⁴ MB, telegram to EG, 29 September 1932. A reference to Vsevolod Meyerhold, the Russian theater empresario.
- ³⁵ MB, letter to JBD, 12 October 1932.
- ³⁶ G. M. Beckett, letter to MB, 11 January 1935. Pollack notes the work was the subject of derision in the BBC offices.
- ³⁷ EG, essay on Marc Blitzstein's music, n.d. Sadly, Eva would die shortly after Blitzstein finished *The Condemned* and would not see the success of *The Cradle Will Rock*.

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