

*Kurt Weill*

# Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny

Libretto by Bertolt Brecht

English translation by David Drew and Michael Geliot

Created by genre-defying composer Kurt Weill and pioneering dramatist Bertolt Brecht, *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* is a cynical tale of an imaginary yet plausible boom town peopled by fortune seekers, prostitutes, and shady businessmen (and women) where absolutely anything goes—except having no money. This modern myth features a spectacularly inventive score that blends grand opera, popular song, and jazz-infused rhythms into a highly original mix. Teresa Stratas and Astrid Varnay, two of the great singing actresses of the 20th century, head an ensemble cast that also includes Richard Cassilly and Cornell MacNeil.

---

## Act I

A desolate region. Leocadia Begbick, Trinity Moses, and Fatty the Bookkeeper—three fugitives from justice—can go no further because their truck has broken down. Word has reached them that gold is being found on the coast. “You’ll get more gold from men than from rivers,” says Mrs. Begbick, and they decide to found a new city—Mahagonny, “town of nets.” Here man will be able to do whatever he pleases.

The town grows. Jenny arrives with six other girls.

News of Mahagonny reaches the big cities. Fatty and Trinity Moses recruit people to their new paradise.

The discontented of the world make their way to Mahagonny. Among the arrivals are four lumberjacks from Alaska: Jimmy Mahoney, Jacob Schmidt, Moneybags Billy, and Alaska Wolf Joe. Mrs. Begbick welcomes them and offers them their choice of girls. Jimmy chooses Jenny.

Mrs. Begbick, Fatty, and Trinity Moses lament the falling prices in Mahagonny. No one is making any money. The town of nets is catching nothing. People are leaving.

Jimmy is disappointed. There are too many signs prohibiting things. Nothing makes him happy—not the cheap liquor, the peace and quiet, smoking or sleeping. Something is missing. For seven years he worked and froze in Alaska and saved his money. Now he has come to Mahagonny and found nothing except too much peace, too much unity, and too much for man to rely on.

A hurricane threatens Mahagonny. During this dreadful night, Jimmy Mahoney discovers the laws of human happiness: “Typhoons do not leave much wreckage compared with us men when looking for amusement. Whatever chaos they can cause, we men will surpass it.” Everyone should take whatever he wants and not be bound by any laws.

## **Act II**

The hurricane has spared Mahagonny. The word in Mahagonny now is "Do it!"

One year later Mahagonny is booming. Jacob Schmidt eats himself to death, the brothel does brisk business, and Alaska Wolf Joe is killed in a prizefight with Trinity Moses. Jimmy, having bet all his money on Joe, is broke.

Jimmy, even though he has no cash, treats all the men to drinks at the bar. He imagines himself escaping from Mahagonny and returning to Alaska on a ship. His dream is interrupted brusquely by Trinity Moses, who demands that Jimmy pay up for the drinks. Jimmy cannot pay and the others won't help—he has committed a crime punishable by death.

## **Act III**

Jimmy is chained to a tree. He wishes the sun would not rise on the day of his impending trial.

Trinity Moses, the prosecutor, is selling tickets to the trials. Toby Higgins is acquitted of murder after passing money to the court. Jimmy's case is next. He asks Billy for money, invoking memories of their days in Alaska, but Billy won't help. Jimmy is charged with seducing Jenny, with singing a cheerful song on the night of the hurricane, with inciting the people of Mahagonny to abolish law and order, and with abetting the murder of Alaska Wolf Joe. For these crimes he is sentenced to prison and hard labor; but for having no money to pay his debts—the greatest of crimes—he is sentenced to death.

The people of Mahagonny look to the town of Benares for help, as others once looked to Mahagonny. But Benares has been struck by an earthquake.

Jimmy says goodbye to Jenny. When he tries to delay his execution by reminding the people of Mahagonny that there is a God, they perform the play "God Comes to Mahagonny." It tells how the Almighty condemns the town and is overthrown by its citizens, who declare that they can't be sent to hell because they are already in hell.

Jimmy is executed.

During the final days of Mahagonny, the survivors demonstrate for their ideals, each against the other.