

Sieben Todsünden, Die

(‘The Seven Deadly Sins’).

Ballet chanté in eight parts by [kurt Weill](#) to texts by [bertolt Brecht](#); Paris, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, 7 June 1933.

Anna I (soprano) and her sister, Anna II (dancer), set out from Louisiana. In seven years they hope to earn enough in the big cities to return and build a house for their Family (two tenors, a baritone and a bass – the last is ‘Mother’). Anna II is pretty, Anna I is practical. With just one savings book between them, they are really two sides of the same person.

Sloth The family lives in the hope of Anna II becoming industrious. Its prayers are punctuated by the proverb: ‘The devil makes work for idle hands’. Meanwhile, Anna II falls asleep during the exploit she and her sister have devised: Anna II makes a scene by accosting strange men in the park; Anna I then offers to remove her for a fee.

Pride In Memphis Anna II learns that ‘pride is something for the rich’. She thinks of her dancing as art, but the cabaret audiences demand striptease for their money.

Anger In Los Angeles the sisters work as film extras. When Anna II protests at the ill-treatment of a horse, she is sacked. Her sister teaches her to curb her anger in the interests of getting on. Complaining of the paltry sums coming in, the Family prays that ‘our children may know the way that leads to prosperity’.

Gluttony In Philadelphia Anna II is engaged as a solo dancer. She must watch her weight (two servants with revolvers assist her) or break her contract.

Lust In Boston the sisters find a man called Edward who has money. But Anna II loves Fernando, who has none. She is forced against her will to remain faithful to Edward.

Avarice Anna II spells financial ruin for Edward, who shoots himself. Others follow suit. Now in Baltimore, she achieves fame. But eventually her naked displays of greed turn her fame into notoriety.

Envy In San Francisco Anna II is envious of all those who commit sins with impunity. She is rebuked by her sister and repents.

Epilogue After seven years away, the two Annas return to live in their little house in Louisiana.

The above synopsis is culled from the ballet’s sung texts, written by Brecht, and the scenario. The latter was not by Brecht, as later assumed, but by the impresario Edward James and the artistic director [boris yevgen'yevich Kochno](#). James had agreed to fund the first season of Kochno’s and Balanchine’s Parisian company ‘Les Ballets 1933’, provided they commissioned a new work from Weill. That work, *Die sieben Todsünden*, turned out to be the collaboration of mutually estranged exiles. Weill, recently arrived from Germany, initially wanted to work with Cocteau. James however insisted on Brecht, from whom Weill had become alienated during the Berlin production of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*.

The text and vocal score were written in April 1933, the full score during the following month. Lotte Lenya, with whom Weill was going through divorce proceedings (they later remarried), was also summoned. She sang the part of Anna I (her current lover, Otto von Pasetti, who came from Vienna with her, was given a tenor part in the Family). The dancer, for whose appeasement James had devised the ballet, was his wife, Tilly Losch, who divorced him the following year. Caspar Neher (with whose wife Weill was having an affair) was persuaded to serve as stage designer.

Each 'sin' is conceived as a separate musical number. The Family, all-male quartet, sings in all but the outer movements, providing a kind of linking refrain, now with quasi-religious intonations, now in the style of a German *Singverein*, now like a barbershop quartet, at all times in parodistic vein. There is also a musical link with the transformation of the recurring opening motif. The score represents a remarkable fusion of popular and classical styles with an almost symphonic coherence.

Despite the personal complications of the original production, it proved a huge critical success. When the troupe transferred to the Savoy Theatre in London on 28 June (the title having been changed to *Anna-Anna* after intervention by the Lord Chamberlain) the critical reception was lukewarm. Lenya's revival of the work in the 1950s gave birth to a new version, with Anna I's numbers transposed down a perfect 4th. She thereby inaugurated a frequently-copied style of performance at odds with her husband's original intentions.

Stephen Hinton