

# Hanns Eisler, 20th century composer

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5 July 2024

An unusual musical program was presented in New York City recently, a rare opportunity to hear some of the songs of German composer Hanns Eisler (1898-1962).

The program, entitled “Will There Still Be Singing? A Hanns Eisler Cabaret,” was part of a series of programs organized by Carnegie Hall, entitled “Fall of the Weimar Republic: Dancing on the Precipice.” Concerts, films, literature, theater, visual art and other programs dealing with Germany in the period that ended with the coming to power of Adolf Hitler in 1933 took place at Carnegie but also at other venues.

The Eisler Cabaret—with the soprano Karyn Levitt and the Hanns Eisler Trio (pianist Eric Ostling, William Schimmel on accordion and guitarist Ira Seigel)—was held in the modest-sized auditorium of the Center for Jewish History. One of the more interesting segments of the series, it was a chance to hear some of the powerful and moving songs of this politically committed composer, whose work does not receive the attention it deserves.

All but one of the songs in the program were the product of the decades-long collaboration between Eisler and the famous German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), as rendered into English by well-known Brecht translator Eric Bentley. The title of the program comes from one of these songs (*A Saying for 1939*), with its clear reference to the period of Nazi rule: “In the dark times, will there still be singing? Yes, there will be singing, yes, about the dark times...”

Among the songs in the program was perhaps the most famous of the *Kampflieder* (battle songs), *Solidarity Song*, written with Brecht between 1929 and 1931, in response to the Great Depression and the growing threat of fascism. Like all of the Brecht/Eisler songs, its context was the hope aroused by the October 1917 Revolution in Russia. *Solidarity Song* was written for the 1932 film *Kuhle Wampe* (translated into English as “Who Owns the World?”), conceived and written by Brecht, with a score by Eisler.

Other highlights of the cabaret included “There’s Nothing Quite Like Money,” a satire somewhat along the lines of “How to Survive” from *Threepenny Opera*, “The Poplar Tree on Karlsplatz,” a somber and moving song about Berlin in 1946, a year after the fall of the Nazi regime, “Song of a German Mother,” about the regrets of a mother who has sent her son off to war, and “To the Little Radio,” composed in exile in 1942 as part of Eisler’s *Hollywood Songbook*, consisting of words spoken by an exile, addressed to his radio, about receiving news from Nazi Germany.

The man who composed the music to these songs, simple and at the same time so powerful alongside the words of Brecht, was born in Germany in 1898, but grew up in Vienna. Part of the generation that came of age during the imperialist slaughter of the First World War, he served in the Austro-Hungarian army. Eisler was only 20 when revolution and counterrevolution took place in Germany—the November Revolution, triggered by the defeat of Imperial Germany in the war, which was followed by the failed Spartacist uprising and the assassinations of revolutionary Marxist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in January 1919.

Eisler, already in the process of being radicalized by the struggles of the

day, was also a precocious and brilliant student of music. He returned to Vienna after the end of the war and studied with avant-garde composer Arnold Schoenberg from 1919 to 1923.

The enormous contradictions of Eisler’s life are difficult to sum up in one or two sentences. He was one of the star pupils of Schoenberg—the man who developed the notoriously difficult and almost inaccessible twelve-tone method of composition—and at the same time Eisler became a composer who devoted the bulk of his life, from 1925 onwards, to what he saw as the cause of the working class and the struggle for socialism.

He was an artist who was forced to flee Nazi Germany in 1933, was later expelled from the United States in 1948 as a subversive (the “Karl Marx of Communism in the musical field,” in the words of the House Un-American Activities Committee), and ended his life in Stalinist East Germany, where he also fell under a cloud because he was considered an unreliable defender of the dogma of “socialist realism.”

He was a composer whose work includes many politically committed songs and other compositions designed above all for simplicity, but at the same time he never fully disowned the twelve-tone idiom, and used it more frequently in his final years, including in some of his intensely political songs.

Eisler’s life comprises essentially the first half of the 20th century, the decades of the first and second world wars, of the Russian Revolution, and of the Stalinist and Fascist counterrevolution. This period of unprecedented class struggle and crisis was very different from the organic growth of capitalism in the second half of the 19th century, as well as the period of comparative political quiescence in the quarter-century of relative prosperity and stabilization following World War Two.

Eisler allied himself politically with the German Communist Party (KPD) in the mid-1920s (as did Brecht), only a few years after the failure of the German Revolution of 1923, and just as Stalinism was beginning to fasten its grip on that party and the entire Communist International. This reflected the growth of the nationalist bureaucracy in the first workers’ state, a bureaucracy whose interests were summed up in the slogan of “socialism in one country.” The program of national socialism meant the repudiation of the fight for socialism internationally. It aided in the isolation of the Soviet Union. The interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy led it to search for allies within the imperialist camp and bourgeois liberalism, and the Soviet and international working class was repeatedly betrayed.

Not yet 30 years old, Eisler was miseducated and disoriented by Stalinism. As a composer, he embraced the anti-Marxist conception of “proletarian culture,” the idea that the material and spiritual culture developed in the past could and should be ignored in favor of a supposedly “socialist” and “revolutionary” culture of the still oppressed working class, created arbitrarily and “by laboratory methods,” as it were, in Leon Trotsky’s phrase. In practice, “proletarian culture”—and its successor policy, “socialist realism”—became a means of justifying and even glorifying the Soviet ruling caste. The conception was embraced by the growing Stalinist bureaucracy precisely because it shared a common method with “socialism in one country,” and helped, through its “left” pretensions, to disguise the retreat from an international revolutionary perspective.

The proletarian culture dogma that guided Eisler was reinforced during the “Third Period,” that crucial phase in the degeneration of the Communist International inaugurated after the Sixth Congress of the Comintern in 1928. It was a suicidal policy that paved the way for Hitler. The Moscow bureaucracy and its German supporters claimed that the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) was “social fascist,” and no different from the Nazi menace. The KPD rejected Trotsky’s urgent call for the united front, a tactic advanced in order to unify and mobilize the many millions of German workers against the Nazis.

Eisler’s writings and his practical activity during these years were shaped by the fraudulent leftism of the Third Period. He had earlier become increasingly hostile to the often-stultifying conventions of classical music in bourgeois society, and correctly insisted that composers and other musicians forsake any ivory-tower conception of “music for music’s sake.” But he took this much further, turning the one-sidedness of Schoenberg’s system into its undialectical opposite, and advancing mechanical arguments in favor of what he called the “workers’ music movement.” Eisler did not go so far as to reject the classics of Beethoven and Brahms, but he insisted there must be a break between this music of the past and current musical expression, and that music would come directly out of the class struggle.

He went so far as to denounce the radio and record player. In 1931, he wrote that, “experience induced us to reject the concert form.” Instrumental or symphonic music, he maintained, “is not right for a proletarian audience... So-called symphonic music is the typical bourgeois form of music-making and became fully developed under capitalism.”

Eisler also denounced jazz as “the most facile musical pleasure.” He insisted that the crisis of music in bourgeois society required “the struggle of the workers for a new music culture corresponding to their class situation which, today, is already beginning to take on a clear shape.”

Both Lenin and Trotsky were intransigent opponents of the theory of “proletarian culture.” Trotsky, in such works as *Culture and Socialism* and *Literature and Revolution*, clearly demonstrated the fallacy of proceeding from a formal analogy between the role of the capitalist class, which developed its culture over a period of centuries, and the proletariat, a propertyless class that had not yet mastered the culture of the past, and whose fundamental historical task posed, not a lengthy period as a ruling class, but rather the dissolution of class society itself.

Revolutionary Marxists have always insisted that the struggle to build a mass socialist movement and to build a socialist society after the overthrow of capitalism requires the fight to assimilate all that bourgeois culture has achieved. (Even more, Lenin insisted that Marxism had “assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture.”)

As Trotsky explained in *Culture and Socialism*, culture, along with the technology that has accompanied the development of the productive forces, has a contradictory character. It is an instrument of class oppression, but it is not **only** that. The revolutionary proletariat can no more simply discard bourgeois culture than it can discard machinery and technique, which must be turned into the means of overcoming the anarchy of capitalist production.

Eisler, and all other advocates of proletarian culture, “stumbled over this contradiction,” as Trotsky wrote, approaching class society “superficially, semi-idealistically.” Capitalism is “bad,” in other words, and the working class must rid itself of the system and everything about it—including, if one were to follow the reasoning consistently, the organization of production!

Despite these mistakes, serious and even fatal under the circumstances in Germany at the time, Eisler was himself a contradictory product of the struggles of the working class and the left-wing intelligentsia. His songs reflected the impact and influence of the Russian Revolution, the immense prestige of the Soviet Union. The Eisler-Brecht songs are the voice of militant class struggle, even as Stalinism used them for

counterrevolutionary purposes.

When Hitler took power, Eisler was in Vienna. Brecht sent word warning him not to return, and for the next five years Eisler traveled almost continuously. He went to Paris, Prague, London, Vienna and also Moscow. He made two trips to the United States before immigrating in 1938, after he obtained a permanent visa. He taught and composed in New York City for about four years, and then moved to Los Angeles, where he joined Brecht, along with many other European artists and intellectuals who had fled the Nazis.

The time in Hollywood could be described as the third stage of Eisler’s musical career—after his studies with Schoenberg and his early compositions, followed by the period of *Kampfmusik* and other works reflecting his political commitment. In California Eisler wrote the scores for eight films, including *Hangmen Also Die!* with director Fritz Lang, and *None but the Lonely Heart*, directed by Clifford Odets. The composer had a low opinion of his work for film, which he said was undertaken primarily because he needed the money. Both of the above films, however, from 1944 and 1945, reflected his classical training, and both were nominated for Oscars.

Although he pronounced himself thoroughly repelled by the conspicuous consumption and commercialism of Hollywood, Eisler also enjoyed the company of a circle of artist friends. He resumed a friendship with his teacher Schoenberg, who was also an exile in Los Angeles, although the two obviously shared little in common politically.

Eisler’s work in Hollywood came to an abrupt halt with the onset of the Cold War against the Soviet Union. He was one of the first artists called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. The witch-hunters made use of the testimony of his sister, Ruth Fischer, who had much earlier been the general secretary of the KPD for a brief period, but who by this time had become a virulent anticommunist. Eisler’s older brother Gerhart was accused of being a Soviet spy. Eisler was blacklisted, and despite the active support of such figures as Charlie Chaplin, Aaron Copland and others, he left the US in March 1948 under threat of deportation.

Eisler went first to Vienna and then to the Soviet occupied zone of Berlin. At first he may have had misplaced hopes in the newly formed German Democratic Republic, for which he wrote a National Anthem in 1949, with words by Johannes Becher.

Soon, however, Eisler ran into difficulties. When he wrote the opera *Johannes Faustus*, for which he also wrote the libretto, he came under bitter attack. In the words of East German Stalinist leader Walter Ulbricht, he was accused of “having formalistically deformed one of the greatest works of our German poet Goethe.” The attack was published in the Stalinist organ *Neues Deutschland*, recalling a similar attack in Moscow’s *Pravda* in 1936, directed against Dmitri Shostakovich for his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. The accusation of “formalism” was then the kiss of death for any creative artist.

The *Neues Deutschland* attack was soon overtaken by a greater threat to the bureaucratic dictatorship, the East German workers’ uprising of June 1953, brutally put down by the regime. Eisler was plunged into depression by these events, as well as by the death of his longtime collaborator Brecht in 1956. For the rest of his life, he was for the most part left alone by the regime. He continued composing, but his work was largely ignored. Even when he received recognition, this was not followed by public performances. Eisler died after a heart attack in September 1962, at the age of 64.

Much earlier, at the time of the infamous Moscow Trials from 1936-38, in which virtually the entire leadership of the 1917 revolution was framed up and executed by Stalin, both Brecht and Eisler privately expressed misgivings. In 1939, at the time of the Stalin-Hitler Pact, Eisler once again found himself in disagreement. When Nikita Khrushchev gave his famous speech exposing some of Stalin’s crimes at the 20th Soviet Party

Congress in 1956, Eisler was undoubtedly not nearly as shocked as many “true believers” in the Stalin cult. It is worth noting that neither Brecht nor Eisler emigrated to the USSR under Stalin.

However, Eisler never could explain the reasons for the crimes of Stalin—the interests of the parasitic ruling caste in the Soviet Union, the bureaucracy which steadily undermined and then, with the restoration of capitalism long after Eisler’s death, completely destroyed the remaining gains of 1917, thus confirming Trotsky’s analysis of Stalin as the gravedigger of the revolution.

In this regard, there is some connection between the role of Eisler and that of the Frankfurt School. Founded as the Institute for Social Research in 1923 and relocating to the US after the Nazis took power ten years later, the Frankfurt School pioneered “critical theory,” with its virulent attacks on classical Marxism. Eisler did not take the same path politically, but he shared some of the pessimism of the Frankfurt School, rooted in the class position of the intelligentsia. It is of some significance that Eisler was the co-author, with Theodor Adorno, a leading figure in the Frankfurt School, of *Composing for the Films*, published in 1947.

In this context, it is perhaps worth taking another look at Brecht’s lyrics for “Song of a German Mother”:

My son, I gave you the jackboots,  
And the brown shirt came from me,  
But had I known what I now know,  
I’d have hanged myself, I’d have hanged myself from a tree.  
And then I saw you march off, son, following Hitler’s train,  
And I did not know all those marchers would never come back again,  
I saw you wear your brown shirt and did not complain or entreat,  
For I did not know what I now know: It was your winding sheet.  
And when I saw your arm, son,  
Raised high in the Hitler salute,  
I did not know all those arms, son,  
Would wither, would wither, would wither at the root.

The words are indeed powerful. They make no mention, however, of the leadership of the German working class during this period, and of its political responsibilities. The fault for the victory of Hitler is transferred from the leadership, the German Communist Party above all, to the individual mother who did not know what would happen (much as in Brecht’s *Mother Courage* and other works). Furthermore, the language implies that the working class supported Hitler, ignoring the fact that the KPD and SPD together enrolled millions of members, and outpolled the Nazis by a significant margin in the last parliamentary election before President Paul von Hindenburg called on Hitler to take on the chancellorship in January 1933.

From time to time there has been renewed interest in Eisler’s work in the more than six decades since his death. About 30 years ago, Decca Records released the *Entartete Musik* (Degenerate Music) series of recordings, under the executive production of Michael Haas, and Eisler was well represented in this series. There have also been other recordings, including historic versions of Eisler songs from the late 1920s and early 1930s, rarely performed works such as the *Lenin Requiem*, dating from 1935, and *Ernstes Gesänge* (Serious Songs), Eisler’s last composition before his death.

Of particular significance are two large scale works of Eisler: the *Hollywood Songbook*, composed during the Second World War and recorded about 20 years ago by the noted German baritone Matthias Goerne; and *Deutsche Sinfonie* (German Symphony), on the theme of the rise of German Nazism. More than an hour in length, this eleven-

movement work for soloists, chorus and orchestra was composed over more than two decades, ending in 1958. These and other works show that Eisler was not completely consistent in his earlier rejection of symphonic music. He combines certain elements of the twelve-tone method that he learned from Schoenberg, and had often returned to in the course of his compositional career, with what has been described as cabaret-style songs and some elements reminiscent of Schubert and early romanticism.

There is a partial echo of Eisler’s attachment to “proletarian music” in the claims today that the crisis of classical composition and declining audiences can be remedied by programming that largely turns its back on the cultural achievements of the 19th and 20th centuries in favor of a misplaced “multiculturalism.”

To put it mildly, this is not the answer to the problems faced by classical music today. Social and political struggles will undoubtedly give birth to composers who have something new to offer, something that is both new and also connected to the best of the musical past. But rather than fighting for music education and subsidized ticket prices to attract new audiences, the classical music establishment often dilutes what it offers to the public. A recent example was the decision to cut back and rename the summer Mostly Mozart Festival at New York’s Lincoln Center, which drew a public criticism from departing conductor Louis Langrée.

The odyssey of Hanns Eisler has a broader historical significance. It calls attention to the fundamental lessons of the 20th century, above all the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism, just as the issues that were posed more than 90 years ago—the massive polarization of society amid economic misery and suffering for the majority, the approach of imperialist world war, the growing attacks on democratic rights and the danger of fascism—are again raised, now more acutely than ever before. The 20th century remains unfinished. The tasks posed during those decades have reemerged, after a relatively lengthy delay, and the choice remains: socialism, or the barbarism of a third world war that threatens the destruction of human civilization.



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