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## Composer for Socialism: Betz on Eisler

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Albrecht Betz, *Hanns Eisler: Political Musician*, translated by Bill Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), £25.00

A book on Hanns Eisler in English has been long overdue, not only because of his impeccable credentials as a composer (his teacher, Schoenberg, regarded him as highly as he did his two other talented pupils, Berg and Webern), but also because Eisler wrote and spoke brilliantly on the subject of music. Albrecht Betz's book, *Hanns Eisler: Musik einer Zeit, die sich eben bildet* (1976), which was capably translated by the late Bill Hopkins, has the advantage of having been written by an author who identifies with Eisler's philosophical (that is, Marxist) standpoint, and whose admiration for Eisler therefore does not stop short at the music. Betz is in sympathy with Eisler's aims, which Eisler himself stated quite explicitly in 1957 at a conference of German composers and musicologists: 'I have always striven to write music that serves socialism. This was often a difficult and contradictory exercise, but the only worthy one for artists in our time.'<sup>1</sup>

It is to Betz's credit that throughout his excellent book the contradictions within 'music for socialism' are documented in an illuminating fashion. Regrettably our own Western critics do not seem capable of addressing themselves to the problem of the contradictions within music and capitalism in the same way. Eisler himself remarked on the importance of the relationship between banking and music and castigated his musical colleagues for underestimating it!

In particular Betz gives space to two crucial debates within the socialist camp: first, the debate between Eisler and Lukács, which touched on many problems and which today still concerns all thinking musicians, whatever their ideological persuasion. Lukács's doctrine of the exemplary value of the art works of the rising bourgeoisie and the subsequent destructive decadence that resulted from the decline of the bourgeoisie, was attacked by both Eisler and Brecht for being mechanistic and undialectical. They regarded his attitude towards the classics as unduly reverential and academic, and considered that he applied economic determinism in a crude way, such that anticipatory movements in art and science were denied. Betz writes:

For Eisler and Brecht questions of assimilating and reworking the heritage had nothing to do with conservation or doctrinaire discussion, but were specifically creative problems which occupied them in a practical way. [p.165]

The second issue, concerning Eisler's projected opera *Johann Faustus*, for which he wrote the libretto himself, makes for fascinating reading. In the light of recent German history Eisler had set out to reinterpret the Faust legend. Faust is depicted as the vacillating intellectual, unable to commit himself; finally, irrespective of his will, he finds himself in the conservative camp. In 1952 the Communist Party initiated a debate on the theme of Eisler's re-interpretation of Faust; Betz describes the setting at

the Academy of Arts in Berlin as that of a court-room, with Eisler, in the role of defendant, having only a few friends such as Brecht and the director Felsenstein to support him. Even Walter Ulbricht, the General Secretary of the Party, entered the debate against Eisler, and finally a universal ban was put on Eisler's Faust. Eisler had

perpetrated an affront to German history, to 'humanistic' intelligence, and above all to Goethe. Goethe's 'Faust'—the 'positive hero' *par excellence*—he had transformed into a negative, destructive figure. [pp.223-4]

The negative aspect of this affair does not have to be spelled out; Eisler returned to Vienna, where he was living, depressed and unable to compose. On the other hand it does demonstrate a serious and critical attitude on the part of the State towards its artists, which contrasts with the *laissez-faire*, often indifferent stance adopted by most Western administrators. Eisler was an artist who took up an issue of profound importance to his countrymen, treated it in a controversial manner, and bore the consequences. The Party functionaries acted and, because of the specific relationship between State and artist, *had* to act in what they, as German socialists, regarded as a responsible manner. Bearing in mind the traumatic experience, particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War, of the German working classes, the Party's case was arguable: this was not the time for intellectuals to undermine the Faust image. If history is able to make fools of the functionaries in this instance it is because the functionaries had no option but to commit themselves. In the West our functionaries, who also dole out or withhold money and favours, can hide, play safe, or simply opt out, while even talented composers write unaccountable abstractions; unlike their Eastern counterparts, the contemporary crisis of criteria need not concern them.

Betz divides Eisler's life and music into four periods. The early, formative period, when he was a student of Schoenberg, includes compositions written in Vienna up to 1925. In the late twenties and early thirties Eisler lived in Berlin, where he became music critic of *Rote Fahne* (Red flag), the German Communist Party journal, and was active as pianist and composer in an agitprop group; here he met, befriended, and collaborated with Brecht, the single most important influence on his life, and produced some of his finest political songs. The third phase is the period of exile. Eisler eventually settled in the USA in 1938, where he composed some of his best concert music as well as film music for Hollywood. But in 1947, at the height of the cold war, he was summoned before the House Un-American Activities Committee; accused of being the 'Karl Marx of Communism in the field of music', he was deported, despite a petition signed by many renowned artists and scientists. Eisler finally made his home in the GDR, became professor at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik (which now bears his name), and continued his prolific work for films and the theatre. This was the final phase: he died on 6 September 1962.

Betz brings a wealth of musical material and information to illuminate each phase of Eisler's life, and in doing so, because of the breadth of Eisler's activity, contributes to a general understanding of the important developments and conflicts of the last 50 years. Even the break with Schoenberg, which Schoenberg could understand only in purely personal terms, cannot be explained except by Eisler's political motivation. Betz writes:



His [Eisler's] political criticisms of new music were initially focussed on its *isolation*, and on the fact that although its hermeticism and inaccessibility were supposed to be proof of real quality, it was actually transparently lacking in content . . . In short, it was the fact that music 'turned a deaf ear' to the conflicts of its times, its social confrontations, that disturbed him and made him want to break away from it. [p.43]

The 'hermeticism and inaccessibility' of new music had of course been defended by the Frankfurt School, a leading light of which had been Eisler's erstwhile friend and collaborator Theodor Adorno. Betz quotes Eisler's view of Adorno's post-war positions:

It is one of the peculiarities of that Institute in Frankfurt that it sees all tendencies towards dissolution as progressive, with a sort of half-baked Marxism . . . They only want to be more clever than the bourgeois theorists, but they do not want to take issue with them. [p.244]

For all this it is clear that Eisler's profound respect for Schoenberg never wavered; nor for that matter did it ever degenerate into sycophancy, or blind him to Schoenberg's faults. Eisler championed Schoenberg's music in Eastern Europe when it was considered to be the embodiment of formalism and anti-populist decadence, and at the end of 1954 he gave a major lecture on Schoenberg at the Berlin Academy of Arts:

I have no need of the Chinese saying: 'He who does not honour his teacher is worse than a dog' in order to assert here that Schoenberg was one of the greatest composers, and not only of the twentieth century. His mastery and originality are astonishing, his influence was and is vast. His weaknesses are more dear to me than the strengths of many other. The history of music is unthinkable without him. The decline and fall of the bourgeoisie, certainly. But what a sunset! [pp.227-8]

According to the violinist Rudolf Kolisch, Eisler was the only pupil of Schoenberg who dared to voice dissent openly.

Eisler annoyed him a great deal, particularly because of his . . . intellectual independence. In fact Eisler was never intellectually submissive . . . He was always rebellious, and even contradicted, which was a mortal sin, of course—quite inconceivable. [p.7]

In the extensive central section of his book Betz discusses the militant songs and political ballads of Eisler's Berlin period, with just the right balance between musical content and social function; a section entitled 'The Great Syntheses' deals with two of Eisler's masterpieces from the early thirties: *Die Massnahme* and *Die Mutter*. Betz's discussion of the relationship between text and music in *Die Mutter*, though necessarily brief, highlights some significant details and also includes (p.109) a revealing quote from Brecht on Eisler's method in the song. Betz's dictum in his final chapter characterises this relationship: the text is primary and the music is not secondary.

In his American exile Eisler produced an abundance of marvellous songs, as well as some of his best chamber music, including *14 Arten, den Regen zu beschreiben*, which, in view of Eisler's own high opinion of the work, probably merited more attention from Betz. But he does provide interesting information on Eisler's film music, with particular reference to *Composing for the Films* (1947), the book, born out of his experiences in Hollywood, that Eisler wrote in collaboration with Adorno. The witch-hunt that resulted in Eisler's deportation from America is well documented and Betz records the significant tribute paid to Eisler by the future President of the United States, Richard Nixon (which also reminds us of his

role in the affair): 'The case against Hanns Eisler is perhaps the most important ever to have come before the Committee.' (p.199)

The final chapter of Betz's book is entitled 'Eisler's Modernity', which, in the light of what has gone before, is almost redundant. Eisler's relevance to the present day shouts out at the reader on every page. In an interview, Alexander Goehr, explaining his dedication of a work to Eisler, described him as 'a wise man'. Wisdom seems to be in short supply in our musical life these days, and on reading this book our shortcomings, both as musicians and as human beings, become painfully obvious. At a time when the establishment is laying siege to socialism on all fronts, Albrecht Betz's book is a crucial contribution on one of the most significant composers of the 20th century, which all progressive musicians will enjoy.

<sup>1</sup> Hanns Eisler, *Materialen zu einer Dialektik der Musik* (Leipzig: Verlag Philipp Reclam jun., 1976), p.5.