

BRECHT'S CHAIR

By Karyn Levitt

The stage manager hauled up a massive wooden bar stool from the basement. But when I sat on it, it squeaked so annoyingly that I couldn't sing on this ailing piece of furniture, no matter how charmingly historical a set piece it made. Then he got another idea and from the wings brought out a folded-up chair, which looked like it could fit into one of those sports bags, except that it wasn't plastic and canvas. No. It was a director's chair made of metal and leather. I'd never seen anything like it. I sat in the director's chair. It felt "just right" (like *Goldilocks*). Little did I know the magical powers a chair could possess. But let me start at the beginning.

I am a singer. I champion a neglected but remarkable German repertoire: the songs of Bertolt Brecht and Hanns Eisler in English versions by Eric Bentley. Upon first hearing the Eisler songs, I can't say that I liked them — they were unromantic, chilling, boasting strange harmonies, and reflecting a darkness and pain that I found hard to bear. Reminiscent of the moral blackness of Hitler's Europe, the songs scared me — I felt I was looking into the abyss. I listened again and to my surprise began to appreciate their cold lyricism, atonality, and concision. It became increasingly clear that they could not be included under the rubric of romanticism: they were, in fact, utterly modern. Soon they were conveying a message that we are living in dark times. Then something I couldn't account for happened: the songs had infected me, and it was as if I had contracted a rare malady or had been poisoned.

I first encountered Hanns Eisler's music by way of meeting Brecht's translator, Eric Bentley, whom I'd written to in late August 2011 (at the suggestion of my acting teacher) to request advice on a show I'd intended to create of the songs of Kurt Weill. Imagine my surprise when to my letter the then 94-year-old inductee into the American Theatre Hall of Fame answered me a week later (in an email) that singers are too focused on Kurt Weill. And his suggestion was for me to instead focus on Hanns Eisler. I had to ask

"Who's Hanns Eisler?" But I lost no time and proceeded to learn Eisler's songs in Mr. Bentley's English versions. Five weeks later I performed 26 songs by Hanns Eisler for an audience of one and then 30 songs for an audience of 10 in the basement of a church in Concord, MA at the end of November.

In the first year and a half of our work together, I traveled back and forth to New York City from Boston for coaching sessions with Eric Bentley and my pianist. Brecht's words demanded a lot — you had to be real and not lay anything on them. Eisler's music demanded a lot — some of the songs are atonal and require time to burn them into your brain and your being. And I demanded a lot from myself: I read the plays from which the songs come; I read all of Eric Bentley's commentaries on the plays; I read Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* to get the historical context; I listened to recordings of all the noted Eisler singers, past and present, as well as much of Eisler's film and chamber music. And I've worked continuously on digesting everything to make the songs my own.

The Brecht-Eisler songs are not straight ahead: they require a certain understanding that you must make for yourself. In numerous coaching sessions, Eric Bentley would tell me to imagine that something terrible had happened but "a long time ago," and "now you're just reporting." He said to listen to Billie Holiday sing "Strange Fruit." "She sings the lynching." I began to think of myself as the messenger in a Greek tragedy. Something dreadful has happened (offstage), which I alone witnessed, and now I must deliver the news. Unlike tragedy, however, Brecht's art form does not aim at the arousal and purgation of pity and terror, but rather illumination without *sturm und drang*. (All that light pouring onto the stage is one hallmark of Brecht's theater.) The awful story is sometimes your own, which you bear witness to, but at a remove, as if speaking about yourself in the third person, if not also with a twinkle in your eye. You are, as Eric Bentley said, "just reporting." Add to this, Eisler's frequent direction on his scores to sing *with friendly expression*.

2012 came and Eisler's name was in the papers for the 50th anniversary of his death in 1962. Celebratory concerts were happening the world over. Over the next four years, with pianist Eric Ostling I performed Eisler at colleges around the country. In 2015 we recorded a CD, *Eric Bentley's Brecht-Eisler Song Book*, which received rave re-

Zusammenfassung

Die amerikanische Sängerin Karyn Levitt berichtet über ihre durch Eric Bentley vermittelte Bekanntschaft mit Eislers Liedern, über die Entstehung ihres Eisler-Programms in englischer Sprache *Will There Still Be Singing?* und über ihren Auftritt im Brecht-Haus, Berlin, im März 2017.

Karyn Levitt in Mariposa Museum, NH

Photo by Paul Nickelsberg



views from Eisler experts in the *Eisler-Mitteilungen* and in the *Feuchtwanger Society Newsletter*. I produced *Happy Birthday Eric Bentley: A Centennial Tribute Concert at The Town Hall* in New York City honoring my mentor's 100th year. And in 2016 I launched a new show, called *Will There Still Be Singing? A Hanns Eisler Cabaret*, which I premiered in New York City at Café Sabarsky in Neue Galerie, with Eric Ostling leading The Hanns Eisler Trio, and then performed it at the legendary downtown cabaret club, Metropolitan Room, to rave reviews.

On March 16th, 2017, Eric Ostling and I gave the Berlin premiere of *Will There Still Be Singing? A Hanns Eisler Cabaret* at Literaturforum im Brecht-Haus. (This archive and foundation on Chausseestrasse was once the home of Bertolt Brecht and actress Helene Weigel.) The concert was also to celebrate the European release of our CD.

We were curious about what the Germans' response would be to their own repertoire coming back to them in English. Would it be for them an experience of Brechtian alienation in the extreme? Or would they accept the rendering of their prized 20th C writer's words in English, retrofitted to Eisler's German music by Eric Bentley?

A Visit to the Graveyard

Before the first rehearsal I visited the graves of Brecht and Eisler in the cemetery right next door to Brecht-Haus. Reportedly, this graveyard (*Dorotheenstädtischer Friedhof*) was visible from the bathroom window of Brecht's house, and every day Brecht looked out on it. In July 2016, when I first visited Berlin to meet Peter Deeg, the Eisler expert who'd reviewed our CD for Internationale Hanns Eisler Gesellschaft, it was Hanns Eisler's birthday. The fortuitousness of my being in Berlin on July 6th was unplanned: I didn't know it was his birthday and my visit simply had to do with the timing of my host's invitation (who was equally unaware of his birthday). Yet serendipity and auspicious timing have figured strongly in this project. Peter offered to bring me to their graves: "It is a very friendly cemetery, don't worry." This visit felt like an unintended pilgrimage. At Hanns Eisler's grave I said, "Hello," then on impulse sang "The Poplar Tree on Karlsplatz" a capella. Upon hearing me sing *that* song, Peter suggested we walk over to Karl(s)platz itself, where the monument with Brecht's poem still exists, flanked by two enormous poplar trees, and there I sang the song again.

On March 13, 2017, I visited Brecht's grave, this time alone. My connection with Brecht had always been mediated by Eric Bentley. (And to comprehend EB's coachings I had always to ask my acting teacher afterwards to translate. She would say, "It's like *Dragnet*: 'Just the facts, ma'am'." Admittedly, I was an unlikely choice to sing Brecht, given my passionate nature, which Eric Bentley termed, "Wagnerian," and therefore the opposite of Brecht. "Brecht is a pressure cooker," he'd say. "You must keep the lid on. But *you* want to let the steam out." To keep the lid *on*, I had to play against the grain of my being. The project itself has been a pressure cooker in all ways: selling songs by a forgotten composer, creating the audience, getting bookings, all while one's aged mentor, already 101, is still alive. Easy it isn't.)

Now I had the chance for a direct connection. I addressed the grave of Mr. Brecht out loud in halting imperfect German. I realized I had never asked for his permission to sing his words, and this suddenly felt imperative: I must. I asked with a hopeful heart for his help to be a fit instrument to transmit his great art. That was all.

Then I walked over to Hanns Eisler's nearby grave and likewise made my request. My impression (which came to me as an image in my mind) was that he stood there before me (not in any sensory way), wearing a suit, and was smiling at me. I found myself extending my right hand slightly into the air, which in this intangible interaction, he kissed, and I further reached out to touch his left cheek which (had he been there) would have been where my hand was. My necessarily internal and subjective impression was that Hanns Eisler was glad.

Rehearsal at Brecht-Haus

Two days later we were at the venue for our rehearsal. We needed a barstool, but none were in the space. The stage



Links: Bertolt Brecht,
New Jersey 1946

Rechts: Grab von Hanns und
Steffy Eisler, Berlin 2012



manager took me downstairs to a tavern — Helene Weigel’s *Kellerrestaurant im Brecht-Haus*, which was closed for renovation. (This was fascinating: the restaurant which had operated up until almost present-day offered a menu of favorite dishes that the Brecht family enjoyed.) On the walls hang original black and white photos of the Brecht family ... I wanted to linger there and study the photos, but we had our rehearsal to get on with. Yet the search proved fruitful, for there we found a capacious bar stool, all wood, and the seat was screwed into a long wooden shaft.

Then we rehearsed. When it came to the final song, “You who will be born up by the flood in which we went down,” I lost it — I was sobbing. The pain of Hanns Eisler’s life, the pain of Brecht’s words, the poignant failure of that generation to “be friendly,” to transcend the horror of WWII — all of it overwhelmed me, and I was just bawling and couldn’t continue. So, our rehearsal necessarily paused while I recovered. It was part of the digestion of the huge experience I was having being at Brecht’s home in Berlin. But it was essential that it happen. And thankfully the Aristotelian pity and terror were purged from my system before the actual performance the next day. Anyway, we tried the stool in the rehearsal — it squeaked, but we thought that maybe with WD-40 (in Berlin they know that trick, too), it would be OK.

The Day of the Show

It’s the tech rehearsal a few hours before the show, and we were setting the lights, running a cue to cue, getting our entrances and exits, and so forth. The wooden stool from the 1940s creaked so loudly that it drew attention to itself, almost comically.

We asked the stage manager again if he had any other options. He thought for a moment and he disappeared into the wing beyond the performance space and brought out a folding metal chair. As he opened it, this was clearly not just any chair but a director’s chair, and not the standard canvas-wood arrangement. No, this was high end — an elegant affair of slim, solid metal pieces that folded with a beautiful leather back and seat. It was in fact Brecht’s own director’s chair. His *Regiestuhl*. I sat in it. It was comfortable. It didn’t creak or groan. And though it didn’t have the height of a bar stool, it was beautiful ... and friendly.

The audience arrived. The house was full. Late in the program something curious happened to me. While singing “The Poplar Tree on Karlsplatz,” my back against the chair’s leather, I felt the unmistakable touch of a hand on my left scapula just above the chair’s leather back, as though a director (in rehearsal) were right behind me slightly to my left communicating a direction to this singer. The message was clear: *Relax, be simple*. An instantly profound relaxation came over me: the tension dropped, and I simply “was” for the rest of the song.

During “You Who Will Be Borne Up” (the closing song), I felt the tidal emotion rising again, but I directed this energy outward toward the audience and was not overwhelmed.

Five curtain calls. An encore. It’s always a good sign when people linger and talk after a performance, as they did for some time that night. We received reflections back from Eisler experts and Brecht experts, from dear friends and new acquaintances, and from the general audience (including young people): they universally loved their Brecht-Eisler songs in English; they’d gotten a perspective on their own history on the times *then* and the times *now*; and that they’d seen themselves through the eyes of America. Someone told me that even though she knew I was singing, her chief experience was of my speaking through music. Message delivered: message received.

Performing the Brecht-Eisler Song Book in Berlin at Brecht-Haus put an experience of the place, the people, the atmosphere, the land, the air, the Linden trees, the ethos into my being, which I never could have gotten otherwise. There was some extraordinary transaction that took place by our giving the show and their receiving it. Perhaps what I’ll treasure most was that I had experienced the gladdened spirit of Hanns Eisler and that I had made my own relationship with Germany’s prized modernist poet/playwright. For, sitting in Brecht’s chair, I felt that I had become *his* singer, and he had become my director.