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978-0-521-24022-2 - Hanns Eisler Political Musician  
Albrecht Betz  
Excerpt  
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## Overture

Thus I believe that precisely Schoenberg's method can become extraordinarily important for a new social music if we can understand how to use it *critically*. It will be a matter of standing Schoenberg on his head somewhat, so that his feet are on the firm ground of our social links with the (historical) struggle of the masses for a new world.

*Eisler on Schoenberg*<sup>1</sup>

I openly acknowledged myself a pupil of that great thinker . . . The mystification which dialectics was subject to in Hegel's hands in no way prevented him from being the first to represent its general modes of operation in a comprehensive and intelligent way. In him it is stood on its head. It has to be turned the right way up if we are to discover the rational kernel inside the mystical shell.

In its mystified form dialectics became a tool of Germanic philosophy because it seemed to transfigure the existent. In its rational form the bourgeoisie and their spokesmen find it a vexation and an abomination because, together with the positive understanding of the existent, it implies the understanding of its negation, its necessary decay, including all evolved forms in the flux of things and thus at the same time demonstrating their transience; it allows nothing to impose on it, and it is essentially critical and revolutionary.

*Marx on Hegel*<sup>2</sup>

His whole attitude is revolutionary in the highest sense. In both the listener and the executant this music develops the powerful impulses and insights of an age in which productivity of every kind is the source of all enjoyment and morality. It brings forth new tenderness and strength, endurance and versatility, impatience and foresight, challenge and self-sacrifice.

*Brecht on Eisler*<sup>3</sup>

Eisler's historical importance lies in the fact that he paved the way for a social art in a field which today is still considered rather as a refuge from politics; and this he did at a time of transition which had been initiated by the October Revolution.

Eisler's musical practice – and theory – is also a first answer to Schoenberg: he endeavoured to abolish bourgeois music, or more

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precisely, the bourgeois in music. This could be seen ultimately as a form of isolation, at a time when modern music and the public were very much growing apart from one another. Only in the perspective of a society no longer divided into classes would such an abolition be possible. Eisler's musical language achieved this not by going counter to the great tradition but entirely through and by means of it. It was precisely the formal innovations in his compositions that enable their social function to be fulfilled.

His saying to the effect that music was made 'by people for people'<sup>4</sup> draws attention to the unity of revolutionary and humanistic intentions. The current separation of feeling from understanding, the supposed unrelatedness of the claims of music to those of politics, those of private life to those of social action, have to be dispelled as false, if ingrained, alternatives, and this must be done by example and incitement through a dialectical art; or more precisely, an art of dialectical materialism.

Eisler worked throughout his life in an atmosphere of tension created by great social, political and aesthetic conflicts, which, for all their contradictions, gave a liberating strength to his music. Their roots are to be found, above all, in the actual course of history. Right from the start, the falterings in the development of socialism, for which he and his art campaigned, the set-backs and blind alleys of a historically young movement, brought about errors which on a number of occasions put an almost unbearable strain on his critical impatience and solidarity. After a while such conflicts die down. It remains valuable to study them for the political lessons they contain. That a man with such a sensitively organized mind and leading a frequently difficult existence should also be confronted by problems of a private nature goes without saying and is of lesser interest in connection with his work.

Four periods may be distinguished in Eisler's work and life. The first includes his education and his early Viennese works, extending up to 1925. The second, his early middle period in Berlin, coincides to some extent with the second phase of the Weimar Republic, from 1925 to 1933. The fifteen-year exile follows as a third, or later middle period, which Eisler largely spent in the USA (until 1948), followed by a fourth, his late period of creativity, from 1950 to 1962 in East Berlin.

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The most important decade for Eisler's development was the 1920s since these years saw the onset of a threefold revolution to which he responded wholeheartedly: the major social upheavals brought about by the First World War and the October Revolution, the 'revolution of musical material' associated with Arnold Schoenberg (free atonality and twelve-note technique) and the arrival of the mass media (radio, the gramophone, sound films) which affected the standing and function of the arts.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1920s there also occurred an event which augured well for cultural history both within and beyond Germany – Eisler's meeting with Brecht followed by their first work together. Differing characters of comparable calibre, both made use of the most advanced resources of their art and shared the same political perspective. In their music theatre and vocal works Eisler and Brecht succeeded in creating a synthesis which, being both geared to actual practice and 'relevant', won back the social impact that had long been played out by bourgeois art, and not least because it drew in a new public and its reactions in a new way.

The two great themes dictated by history – emancipation of the proletariat and the fight against fascism – were not the only ones. The 'purification of the emotions' (as well as their enrichment), involving the whole fabric of life, was inextricably bound up with political enlightenment and mobilization: the aim was to achieve a self-aware, lucid and benevolent rationality, appropriate to a scientific age that was freeing itself from the shackles of capitalist interests.

## 1

## Early years in Vienna

Songs, piano music and chamber music

In the spring of 1923, Schoenberg launched the career of a pupil to whom he had been particularly attached – a pupil whose subsequent development was to take him a long way from anything his teacher could have anticipated.

After studying with him for four years (from 1919 to 1923),<sup>1</sup> Eisler presented his ‘graduation exercise’: already a masterly work, this was a piano sonata, and Schoenberg immediately decided it should be performed, even though – as Alban Berg was surprised to report – ‘the third movement is nothing like completed yet’.<sup>2</sup> Only a week later, Schoenberg wrote this advice to his pupil:

Dear Eisler, As soon as you have this letter, go to Universal Edition,<sup>3</sup> say that I have recommended you to Mr Hertzka, the director, and ask when you can show him your works.

Naturally I can’t promise that anything will come of it. He didn’t take Webern until it was almost too late, and he still hasn’t taken Berg! . . . Best regards. 6.IV.1923.<sup>4</sup>

Few letters of recommendation can have been couched in more sarcastic terms than those in which Schoenberg sought to get Eisler published:

Dear Mr. Hertzka, The bearer of this letter, who should already be known to you through the work he did in a humble capacity at UE,<sup>5</sup> is my former pupil Hanns Eisler. He will be trying to interest you in his Piano Sonata and in an opera which he has not yet quite completed. Unfortunately I am not sufficiently acquainted with your more recent composers to be able to plead effectively with you on his behalf, and so can only hope that my insignificant word will be of some use to you. Even so, I would like to mention that he recently played his Sonata for me, whereupon I spontaneously decided to put it on the programme for the next concert of

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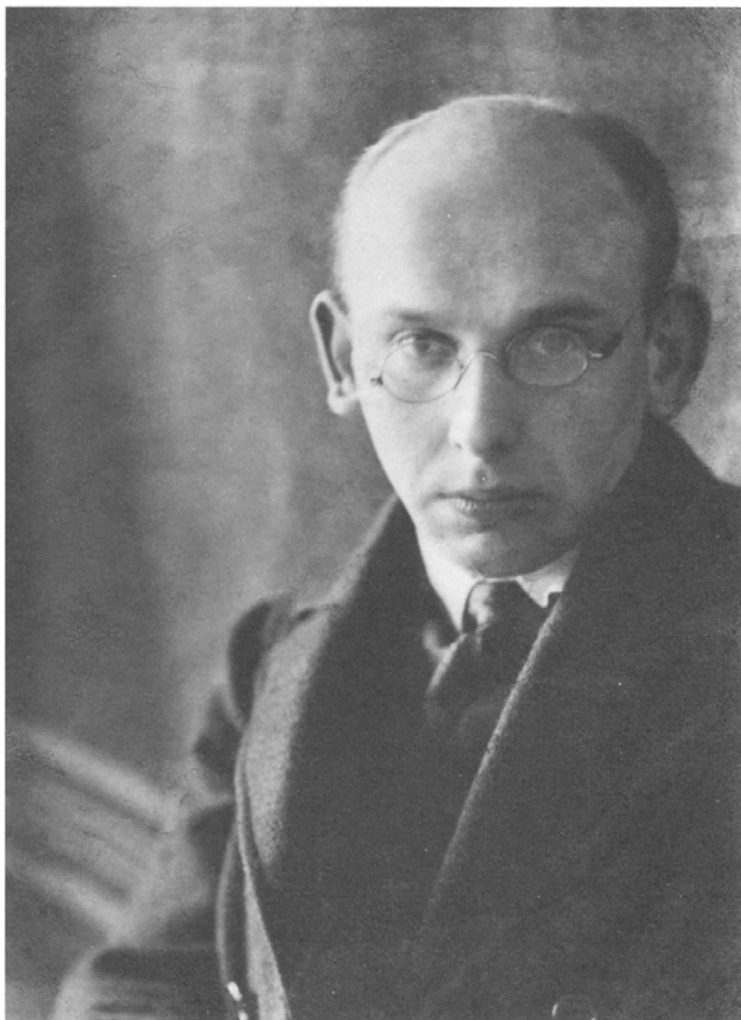
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2 As a student of Schoenberg (c. 1922)

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the Prague Society – an action for which I certainly deserve the censure of all sensible people (including the envious). Naturally I am not offering you any advice; the fact that I have previously recommended to you the works of Webern and Berg on any number of occasions has doubtless proved once and for all my lack of judgment and fallible instinct. So do whatever you want to. With best regards.<sup>6</sup>

The result was unexpected and immediate. On 12 April Eisler cabled his teacher from Vienna: ‘My works accepted for publication by Hertzka. Sonata great success in Prague. Sincerest thanks – Eisler.’<sup>7</sup>

The success of Eisler’s opus 1 had been given a helping hand two days previously by the pianist Eduard Steuermann,<sup>8</sup> whose performances of works by the Viennese group were regarded as definitive. The two items of news reached Eisler simultaneously. A euphoric letter, brimming over with gratitude (quite exceptional for the ‘somewhat refractory fellow’ he then was),<sup>9</sup> went to Schoenberg on 13 April:

Honoured Master, I can give you very pleasing news of myself (you will already have received my telegram). 1) *Hertzka has taken me on as a house composer*. This is a firm agreement. First he will publish my Sonata. My other things are to follow . . . He was enormously amiable and insistently explained that I had only your recommendation to thank for it. 2) The Sonata went down very well in Prague . . . The 3rd movement (Finale) seems to have made the most impact. 3) You may possibly remember that I submitted a cycle of (6) songs for the Salzburg Chamber Festival. Yesterday Pisk came to me (unprompted) to inform me that the committee had accepted it unanimously. It seems that Marx and Wellesz were very enthusiastic about these songs . . .

Honoured Master, you can imagine how happy I feel about all this. For years I have caused you irritation and vexation. If anything worthwhile is going to come of me then I have *only you to thank for it!*

Of course I am still only a raw, blundering beginner, but who knows what sort of a botcher I would have become if you had not taken me on as your pupil!!! And it is not just in music that I owe everything to your teaching, your works and your example. I hope that I have indeed improved a little bit as a person too. You have weaned me from my excessive ‘swanking’ and from my pompous talk and untruths – any remnants of which I hope to get rid of completely.

In addition you have always concerned yourself about my material circumstances, and I shall never forget how you obtained a job for me

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(UE) during that terrible winter of 1919–20. Without it I would literally have starved. The stay in Holland<sup>10</sup> too saved me from a physical breakdown, as my doctor has confirmed as well.

*So I have you to thank for everything* (perhaps even more than my poor parents) and in return I can only give you my promise that I shall try very hard to please you and to do credit to the name ‘pupil of Schoenberg’.

*I earnestly beg you to accept the dedication of the Piano Sonata op. 1.*<sup>11</sup>

In sincerest respect and gratitude/Your most devoted pupil/Hanns Eisler.<sup>12</sup>

When he writes of the ‘vexation’ he has caused a teacher who has frequently enough been portrayed as authoritarian and tyrannical, Eisler is not just indulging in coy impudence. His fellow pupils confirm that he was the only one among them who dared to voice dissent openly. Rudolf Kolisch, who was later to become Schoenberg’s brother-in-law and was already a violinist of note, reports that:

Of course his chief characteristic was rebelliousness. We could feel in the classes that this made for a special relationship between Schoenberg and Eisler. He was very fond of him. Above all he recognized and appreciated his considerable talent. Naturally Eisler annoyed him a great deal, particularly because of his independence, you know, which he simply couldn’t bear – I mean his intellectual independence. In fact Eisler was never intellectually submissive. I must say that he was perhaps the only one of us to adopt this attitude quite consciously. He was always rebellious, and even contradicted, which was a mortal sin, of course – quite inconceivable. Not in matters of fact, naturally . . .<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Max Deutsch:

Very soon Eisler began to criticize Schoenberg (not musically, for heaven’s sake!); but his way of life, his adherence to middle-class precepts, his relationship to his wife and children, and above all his philosophy of life. His admiration for Swedenborg (with a strong element of religion), for Dostoevsky, and Strindberg too . . .<sup>14</sup>

From Schoenberg’s point of view, Eisler’s demonstrations of dissent were simply the rebellions of a pupil who was not materially well off, but who was a favourite of his, and he thought they would probably blow over with time. On the other hand, Eisler’s relation to Schoenberg was from the very first complicated by dual standards. His admiration and respect for the composer and

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teacher to whom he owed a deep debt of gratitude were counter-balanced by an increasingly critical attitude towards his ideological positions: Eisler later spoke of him as a ‘political . . . petty bourgeois of a quite horrendous kind’.<sup>15</sup>

Even though there were times when the relative importance of these opposing judgments obviously shifted, their opposition remained present in Eisler’s mind with striking constancy, neither pole ever entirely taking over from the other. These carefully weighed scruples were a prevailing feature of Eisler’s relations with Schoenberg; he was, however, alone among Schoenberg’s pupils in sharing three of his teacher’s biographical phases: Vienna, Berlin and Los Angeles.<sup>16</sup>

When in 1924 the Viennese journal *Musikblätter des Anbruch* brought out a special issue to mark Schoenberg’s fiftieth birthday, Eisler – at twenty-six the youngest contributor – wrote of his teacher in the following extremely precise terms, which call to mind the dialectician of later years:

It is imperative for the musical world to rethink its ideas and to see in Schoenberg not a saboteur and revolutionary but a master. It is now clear that he created for himself a new kind of material so that he could make music that was as rich and self-contained as that of the Classical composers. *It is he who is the real conservative: he even created his own revolution in order that he could then be a reactionary.*<sup>17</sup>

This paradox, first formulated to account for the case of Schoenberg, was to become a fruitful challenge for Eisler: ‘even in his most “radical” works, Schoenberg was . . . no more than a musician’;<sup>18</sup> and the ‘master’s’ innovations, mistaken for attempts at sabotage and revolution, remained within the realm of music; certainly the concepts used by Eisler in making this assertion – ‘revolution’, ‘reactionary’ – already point a long way beyond that realm.

The muted anticipation of his later criticisms (and their point of view) is camouflaged by the tone of homage. Eisler is still writing as a member of a ‘school’. Its position is as yet by no means assured. The term ‘musical reactionary’ is intended to undermine the attacks of the conservative camp and refers in the first instance to the revival of classical forms in Schoenberg’s most recent





3 Arnold Schoenberg the teacher (1922)

works, in which he has moved on to ‘composition with twelve notes’.<sup>19</sup> Eisler shows solidarity in the campaign against the malicious distortions and narrow-mindedness of those who stand for every kind of musical tradition, the latter being – in Mahler’s words – mere sloppiness. Schoenberg and his pupils alike are conscious of being the representatives of musical evolution, even if the pupils are less histrionic about it than their teacher. Only in the light of his conscientious conception of rigorous artistic labour is it possible to understand his scorn for many ‘composers’ and parasitic musical manipulators who are bogged down in the

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false security of worn-out clichés and who castigate all radical advances into virgin territory as anarchism or charlatanism.

Schoenberg's revolution in musical material and his new means of musical expression, which together represented a purification of musical language as he had found it, were not legislative acts imposed by a great individual merely according to his own requirements; rather, they corresponded, albeit in a somewhat indirect way, to the changing forms of awareness of the early twentieth century, as well as in their own turn contributing to them. We need not here examine how far this growing control over musical material paralleled increasing mastery over the natural world. In order to give adequate expression to the shift in social awareness (which in Schoenberg's as yet partially irrational outlook corresponded to changes occurring within himself) it was necessary to eliminate the late Romanticism that had now run its course; and at a purely technical level this required a fundamental rethinking of existing structural ideas.<sup>20</sup>

The rampant chromaticism of the nineteenth century had undermined major–minor diatonicism, leading to the breakdown of tonality's traditional role as a centre of gravity. Schoenberg, whose early links were with Wagner and Brahms, described how he had moved through various stages of extended and subsequently indeterminate and free tonality to arrive at his abandonment of tonal centres (in the Second String Quartet op. 10 of 1908).<sup>21</sup> This could be said to mark the beginning of his second period, the culmination of his first having been reached in the Chamber Symphony op. 9 with 'great progress in the direction of the emancipation of the dissonance'.

The renunciation of tonality and the hierarchical organization associated with it deprived traditional musical architecture of its meaning.<sup>22</sup> In order to avert the anarchy with which musical forms were threatened, a new kind of organization was necessary, one which would be that much more stable and 'with which it was possible once again to construct forms'.<sup>23</sup> In 1922, whether as a conscious or an unwitting response to this necessity, Schoenberg evolved his method of 'composition with twelve notes related only to one another'. After the atonal middle period – the works of which Eisler considered 'the most important that Schoenberg