

## HANS EISLER

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Many composers have suffered because of their political beliefs and Hans Eisler is a case in particular. It raises the question as to whether politics should be present in music. His father, Rudolph, was Jewish and was a professor of philosophy.

Hans's brother, Gerhart, was a Communist journalist and his sister, Ruth, was a leader of the communists in the 1920s and wrote a book *The Sexual Ethics of Communism*, a study in the origins of the State Party.



*Hanns Eisler (left) and Bertolt Brecht, his close friend and collaborator, 1950*

Hans Eisler was born in Leipzig on 6 July 1898 and, during World War 1, served as a front line soldier in the Austro-Hungarian Army and, in the conflict, was wounded several times. The defeat of Austria took him to Vienna and, from 1919 to 1923, he studied with Arnold Schoenberg and was his first pupil to compose serial music.

He married Charlotte Demant in 1920, but they separated in 1934.

In 1925, he moved to Berlin which was then a city of decadence with its new music, art and films as well as politics. It was a city of liberal sexuality and debauchery. Here Eisler became a member of the Communist Party in which he was very active. He taught at the Marxist Worker's School, and his politics overflowed into his music often with a popular style such as jazz and cabaret. He lived in Berlin with his son, Georg, who became a painter.

It was in Berlin that Eisler formed a lifelong friendship with the poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht, another Marxist with its extreme left wing politics and atheism. They collaborated on plays such as *The Decision* (1930), *The Mother* (1932) and *Schweik in the Second World War* (1957).

To go back a few years to 1929, Eisler wrote a song cycle *Zeitungs Ausschnitte* which is based on items in newspapers, leaflets and magazines of the day and which concentrated on Eisler's socialism. In the 1930s, and with Brecht, he collaborated on protest songs mainly about the political turmoil of Weimar in Germany. The *Solidarity Song* became a popular militant anthem sung throughout Europe and their *Ballad of Paragraph 218* was a protest against abortion.

In 1933, Eisler worked with Brecht on the film *Kuhle Wampe* which was banned by the Nazis. His music and Brecht's poetry was totally banned by the Nazis and so they both went into exile... Brecht to Denmark and Eisler to various places such as Prague, Vienna, Paris, Spain, Moscow and Denmark. He also visited the USA from coast to coast and, in 1938, took up a position in New York teaching composition at the New School for Social Research and wrote some experimental music and music for documentaries.

Early in 1940, he began work on a book *Research Programme on the Relation between Film and Music*, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation which resulted in a new title *Composing for Films*, with Adorno as co-author. While in Berlin, he had temporarily abandoned serial music but returned to this in his *Fourteen Ways of Describing Rain* composed for Schoenberg's 70th birthday which some regard as his finest work. From 1935 to 1937, he worked on his *Duetsche Sinfonie* a choral work based on texts by Brecht and Ignazio Silone which is in eleven movements. He also composed the Hollywood

Songbook over 1938 to 1943, an unsuitable title, with texts by Brecht, Morike, Holderlin and Goethe which won him some popularity.

The Cold War followed and Eisler was put on the black list by bosses of the film studios and endured two questionings by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He was called the Karl Marx of Music and was deemed a Soviet agent in Hollywood and his brother and sister, Ruth Fischer, also had to testify before the Committee.

This may have been somewhat over the top but the matter of sedition and spying had to be taken seriously.

It may not have been wise for some of his friends and associates to raise funds for his defence. Such friends were Charlie Chaplin, Stravinsky, Copland and Bernstein who held benefits concerts. He was deported in March 1948, with his wife, Lou. They returned to Austria before settling in East Berlin. In Germany, he completed the national anthem of the German Democratic Republic as a cycle of cabaret songs of a satirical nature.

He worked on his Faust opera Johannes Faustus which was completed late in 1952. It reeks of political dogma in which Faust betrays the working class by not joining the German Peasants' War. He was criticised for this in the Press and elsewhere and the work was called a slap in the face of German National feeling. He was very unwise to produce such a work and this indicates that politics have no place in music.

On 17 June 1953, there was the workers rebellion which now took precedence over debates about this opera. But Eisler was now depressed but he had brought this malaise upon himself. He was disliked and had widened the gap between him and East Germany. His last work, Serious Songs, shows his acute depression and disapproval of the demise of the Stalin cult.

Surely politics has no place in music. They are separate matters. Music should not be used as political means or propaganda in promoting politics. But then there are composers who promote other issues such as Elgar with his unacceptable arrogance and Britten with his homosexuality and pederasty. I am sure that there are other examples. People may complain of composers who only write church music.

The other problem is that Communists, Marxists and other left wingers can be so volatile and offensive with ruthless moods.

Eisler's collaboration with Brecht ended with the latter's death in 1956 from which Eisler never recovered. He had two heart attacks, the second of which killed him on 6 September 1962.

His 'absolute' music may be his best work and I set out some of his works adding a few more that are political. This is not a complete list and does not include items in the text.

- Divertimento for wind quintet
- Scherzo for string trio
- Septets numbers 1 and 2
- Sonata for flute oboe and harp
- String Quartet
- Chamber Symphony
- Prelude and Fugue on a theme of Bach for string trio
- Lenin, a requiem
- Five suites for orchestra
- Eight piano pieces
- Divertimento, four piano pieces
- Tempo of Time for chorus and small orchestra

Ballad of the Women and the soldiers  
United Front Song  
Cantata Gegen den Krieg  
Nonets 1 and 2

I admire the String Quartet and Chamber Symphony especially.

(1099)

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