

TRULY I LIVE IN A TIME OF DARKNESS – EISLER'S ART SONGS IN ENGLISH

A new CD with Karyn Levitt and Eric Ostling

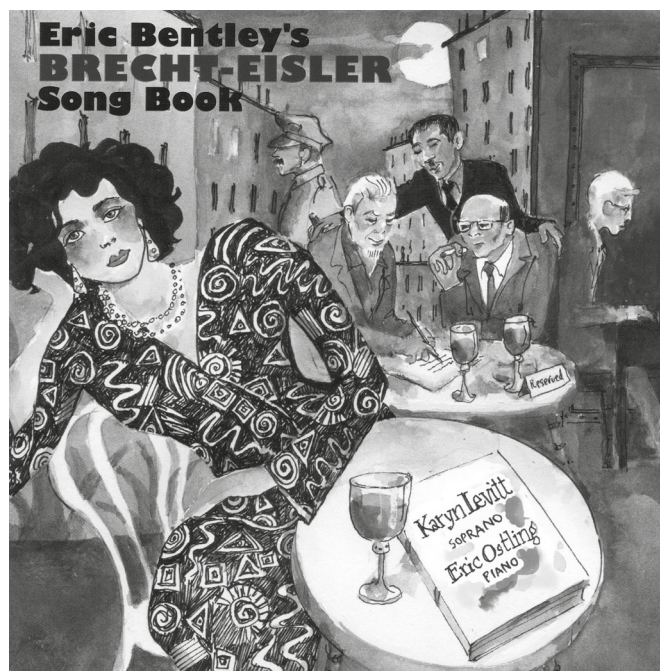
CD: *Eric Bentley's Brecht-Eisler Songbook*. Karyn Levitt (soprano), Eric Ostling (piano). Roven Records.

To mark the year he turns 100, American soprano Karyn Levitt and her accompanist Eric Ostling pay tribute to Brecht translator and author Eric Bentley with a CD containing a selection from his legendary *Brecht-Eisler Songbook*, published in the USA in 1967. It may be almost 50 years old, but the songbook still remains virtually the only way of obtaining sheet music by Hanns Eisler with vocal texts in English – and includes both popular songs and complex *Lieder* in Bentley's translations.

The CD also contains three of Eisler's world-famous 'mass songs', albeit somewhat tellingly only as fascinating and thoughtful solo piano improvisations by Eric Ostling. Popular songs and ballads such as "Love Market" (*Lied eines Freudenmädchens*) and "And what did she get?" (*Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib*) receive nigh-on ideal interpretations; some of them are rendered by Karyn Levitt as if they were art songs – as are, to particularly striking effect, the "Ballad of the Soldier" (*Ballade vom Soldaten*) and the "Song of the Moldau" (*Lied von der Moldau*). Another highlight of the CD, however, are some of Eisler's through-composed art songs, which have probably not been heard with English texts in such skillful interpretations since Robyn Archer's recordings from the 1980s.

Two twelve-tone songs that Eisler composed in 1939 while in Mexican exile are particularly noteworthy: "Truly I live in a time of darkness" (*Elegie* 1939) is presented as a standalone song and not, as in Bentley's songbook, as the first of *Three Elegies* ('To those who came after'); there is, in any case, no evidence that Eisler intended them to be performed as a set. Levitt and Ostling choose a surprisingly cautious tempo for this key work of exile literature, patiently submitting to the inexorable logic of Brecht's words and Eisler's sensitive setting. Where, in cases of doubt, it is often said that Eisler's songs should be taken faster, here we encounter a compelling refutation of that advice in which the calm (but not slow) tempo produces enormous force of expression. The elegy is intelligently preceded by "A Saying for 1939" (*Spruch* 1939, 'In the dark times'), a song that has never spoken to me as directly as in this interpretation by Levitt and Ostling with its focussed and again remarkably judicious tempo.

Of the seven songs from the *Hollywood Songbook* on offer, the commanding performances of "The Sprinkling of Gardens" (*Vom Sprengen des Gartens*) and "The Son" (*Der Sohn II*, 'My teenage son asks me') particularly stand out. Four of the songs in this collection, which Eisler would later break up, are heard with a few bars of introduction not found in the composer's scores, e.g. "To the Little Radio" (*An den kleinen Radioapparat*) and "Easter Sunday" (*Ostersonntag*). These additions may have arisen during live performances but could surely have been omitted for the CD, especially as they may have the effect of shifting the balance of these meticulously conceived artworks.



By contrast, three art songs from the final years of Eisler's life are heard in their original incarnations: "On the World's Kindness" (*Von der Freundlichkeit der Welt*) was previously mostly known from the recording with Ernst Busch; here, however, Karyn Levitt brings out the thoughtful and self-reflexive qualities of the song more clearly in a friendly, authentic tone. "In the Flower Garden" (*Im Blumengarten*), one of the late Eisler's most impressive art songs, is also given a more delicate performance here than, for example, in Robyn Archer's forthright reading for Larry Weinstein's documentary *Solidarity Song: The Hanns Eisler Story* (1996). Finally, one of the most wonderful recordings on the whole CD is dedicated to the 1960 setting "The Plum Tree" (*Der Pflaumenbaum*, second version). In this song, the translator clearly had difficulties distributing the syllables meaningfully over the extremely long and melancholic melismas at the end of each strophe. Karyn Levitt succeeds, however, in divining great poetic beauty from the infelicities of the translation and blending the words and the music to form an artful and contradictory whole, at once unusual and touching.

Overall, then, a highly successful new release, including an apt front cover painting by Joan Chiverton and a total of 21 tracks by Karyn Levitt, Eric Ostling, Brecht, Eisler and Eric Bentley – it comes with a warm recommendation, not only to English-speaking audiences.

Peter Deeg

Moderate 4 – do not drag

Tru - ly I live in a time — of dark - ness!
 Wirk - lich, ich le - be in fin - ste - ren Zei - ten.