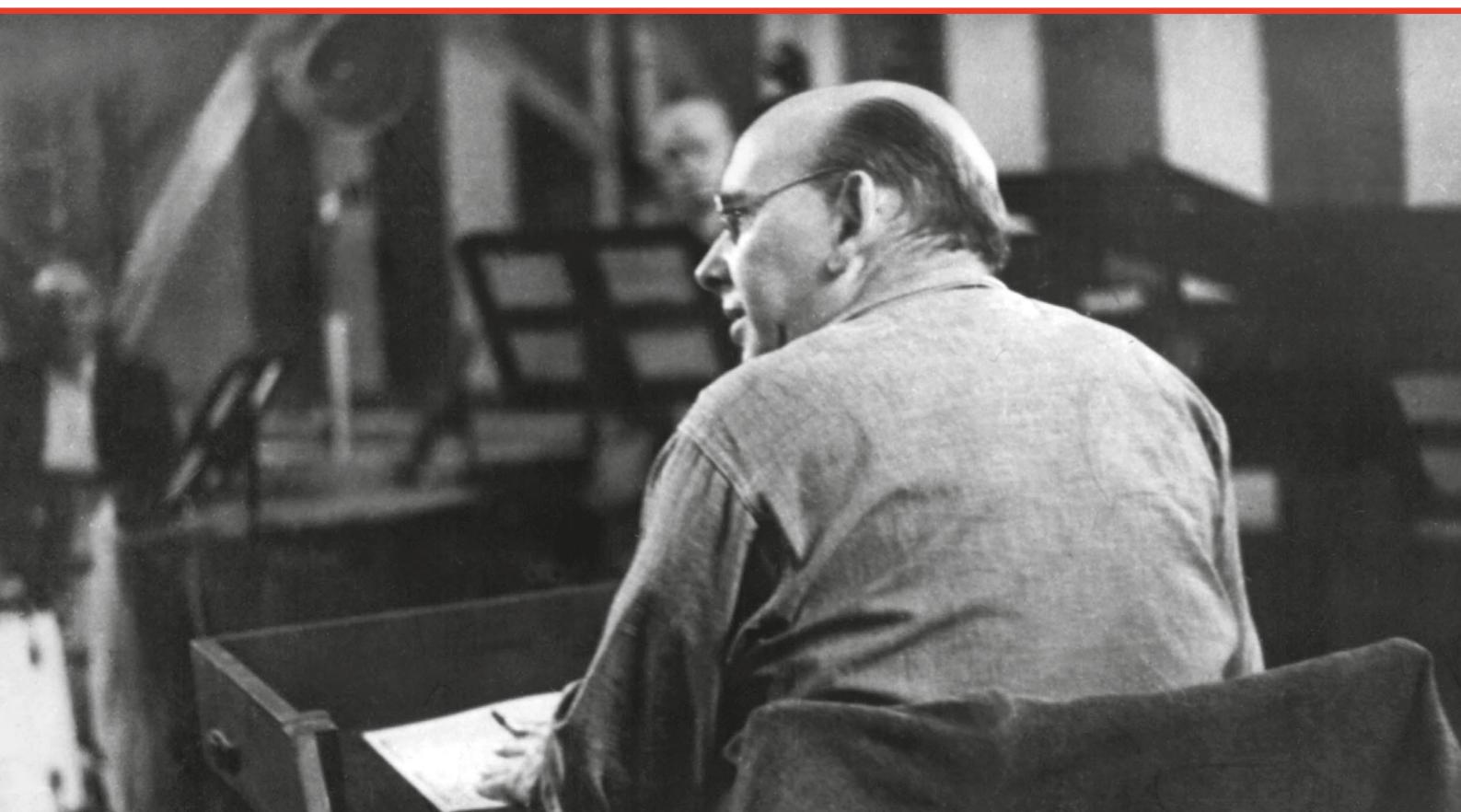


# EISLER-MITTEILUNGEN

## 62

23. JAHRGANG / OKTOBER 2016

HERAUSGEgeben von der internationaLEN HANNS EISLER GESELLSCHAFT  
IM AUFTRaG DER HANNS UND STEFFY EISLER STIFTUNG



## Eislers Orchestermusik

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DIE FÜNF AUFLAGEN DES SPANIENLIEDERBUCHS

# PATIENT, BUT COMPLETELY UNSENTIMENTAL

**Performing Hanns Eisler's Songs in English Translations by Eric Bentley**

**Karyn Levitt in Conversation with Andrea F. Bohlman**

**Andrea F. Bohlman** Tell me about how this project came to be?

**Karyn Levitt** This is a story of extraordinary serendipity. For a long time I was doing one woman shows with various pianists. Kind of in search a repertoire that was right for me as a soprano and artist. Through the whole time I was doing this, I had always wanted to do a show of Kurt Weill, but had never had occasion to do it. Finally, it was the moment. I happened to be with my acting teacher and a few of her other students, and I was performing a few German songs—Schumann and Schubert and Kurt Weill. This Weill song, “Berlin im Licht.” It’s a beautiful song; it’s about the electrification of Berlin. When my acting teacher heard me do this song, she said, “Wow.” I told her I had always wanted to do a show on Kurt Weill. She sent me to Eric Bentley.

I spent a month reading Eric Bentley, and I wrote him a letter. A couple weeks later I was in New York at a play and I got an email on my phone. It was from Eric Bentley. He basically said that singers in New York are “too focused on Kurt Weill.” And that if I wanted his suggestion, I should explore another of Brecht’s collaborators: Hanns Eisler. And he said, “Before we have lunch I suggest that you look into these matters.” Within the hour, I’d purchased his *Brecht-Eisler Song Book* at Colony Music.

*What did happen then?*

I started studying. The only recordings of the songs in English were by Eric Bentley. I took sheet music to my pianists and we played through them. Then I wrote him back that I had “looked into these matters” and “Now will you have lunch with me?”

## Zusammenfassung

Die Sopranistin Karyn Levitt (New York) spricht über ihr Programm mit Eisler-Liedern in der englischen Übersetzung von Eric Bentley und über ihr „Coaching“ durch Bentley. Aus Levitts Eisler-Projekt ging die CD *Eric Bentley's Brecht-Eisler Song Book* hervor (siehe *Eisler-Mitteilungen* 61, S. 15). Bentley gab Levitt u. a. den Rat, „Stahl in ihre Goldstimme zu legen“, was eine Frage der inneren Einstellung und nicht der äußerer Technik sei, und eine ruhige „berichtende“ Haltung einzunehmen. Als Vorbild eines textnahen *Parlando* legte er ihr den Gesangsstil Frank Sinatras nahe.

He said, “You’ll have to bring lunch, I don’t go out anymore.” Just a few days before his 95th birthday [in 2011], I took the train to New York [from Boston]. I brought sandwiches and cookies and yellow roses. And I showed up on his doorstep. We had lunch in his kitchen for three hours, and he tossed around a lot of ideas for shows. I said to him, “I want the Eisler songs.” I felt totally infected by Eisler’s music.

A week later he suggested that I record a demo, “Right now!” Well, here’s someone who is 95. What does “right now” mean? It means “right now!” I said I would get him something in a week to ten days. I picked the songs that I felt were easiest for me at that point to sing. I did “To the Little Radio,” “And What Did She Get?” and, I think, “There’s Nothing Quite Like Money.” I went into the recording studio. Sent it off—Federal Express so it would arrive the next day. Then, two days later, and I just had this thought, to myself. “Brava, Karyn.” Because, you know, I’m a soprano. I don’t sound like Lotte Lenya. I don’t really know if he’s going to like it, but I did my best. So, brava. I got up to check my email and there was a new one. It said, “Bravo, Karyn! Now create a whole show.” It was from Eric Bentley. “Call me on Monday,” he said. “Let’s get started right away.” The other thing he said was, “Put some steel into your otherwise golden voice.”

*So did you work together?*

Back and forth, back and forth [between Boston and New York]. Coachings of several hours every few weeks for a year and a half. Bringing my pianist. He said: create a show and perform it for one person by the end of October. In five weeks, I had learned 26 songs by Hanns Eisler and had created a concert with spoken word. He wanted me to read the poems—his words—and then sing the songs. Because he’s a lyricist, he wanted people to hear his words. That was the format we had for a while. Read the poem, sing the song. By the end of November 2011 he wanted me to learn a few more songs and perform again. Except not in someone’s living room, but out in the world, and to invite a few people. So we rented the basement of a church and we had like ten people. And then three weeks later in December I did a little showcase for drama and music professors from Boston University, Harvard, and Tufts—this was at Longy [School of Music]. So within three months of meeting Eric Bentley I’d learned 30 songs, curated a concert, and performed it three times. And 2012 was the 50th anniversary of Hanns Eisler’s death. It was amazing timing.

Karyn Levitt and Eric Ostling



*This is such a flexible repertoire. There are so many ways to sing it. How did you approach it?*

This whole lyric soprano question mark and what does it mean to “put steel in your otherwise golden voice.” It entailed more than a year of experimentation for me. I really didn’t know *how* to sing the songs. Eric Bentley really wanted me to have a “Brechtian approach” to it. He felt it was important to sing the songs in as calm a way as possible. For the songs to be agitating. What I learned that “putting the steel in my otherwise golden voice” has nothing to do with anything external. It’s an inner attitude. As Eric Bentley always said to me, “You’re just reporting.” How do you get to the place where you’re just reporting? And what does that mean? It doesn’t mean that you’re uninterested in or unaffected by the material. It is still disturbing material. But you are not a victim of it. You are not subject to it. It’s as if you stepped out of the terror of the situation to tell people about it—calmly. That could be applied to anything. “Steel” had nothing to do with vibrato/no vibrato. Soprano or alto. Spoken or sung.

*Were you always interested in recording it?*

Yes, but it didn’t make sense to record it until I “had it.” It was interesting that in 2012 that all this Eisler stuff was happening. That was one moment. And I was always racing to do everything as fast as I could. To learn songs, to make a show, book it, perform it. To put it out there. And now here he is, turning 100, and so we knew it was time to record the CD last year, especially because I was producing “HAPPY BIRTHDAY, ERIC BENTLEY! A Centennial Tribute Concert,” at The Town Hall. We had started working on that in 2014. We formally dedicated the CD to Eric Bentley at the birthday concert [in December 2015], at which we also performed the world premiere of *Songs for Mother Courage* by Darius Milhaud and Eric Bentley, which I brought forth at his suggestion.

*Watching the clip of your performance at the Neue Galerie in New York, I was struck by how captivated the audience was. How have American audiences been responding to your cabaret evening?*

The feeling in the room at Café Sabarsky that evening was heaven. That communal moment when performers and audience are in the same world, in the same moment, at the same time. It is communion, as Stanislavski put it in *An Actor Prepares*. He has a whole chapter on this, on how the actor is in communion with

the playwright and the audience and every object real or imagined. In this case, you have us as musicians in communion with the words and music and also in communion with the audience. That was the first performance of this show. We’re very excited to be doing it again at The Metropolitan Room in New York [in celebration of Eric Bentley’s 100th], to see if this happens again. It’s such dark material; words and music are dark. There’s something about it. At the end of one show in 2014, somebody said, “For such a dark program, why do I feel so happy?” There’s something real that comes through.

*For all of your project’s chilling content, there is such artistic warmth.*

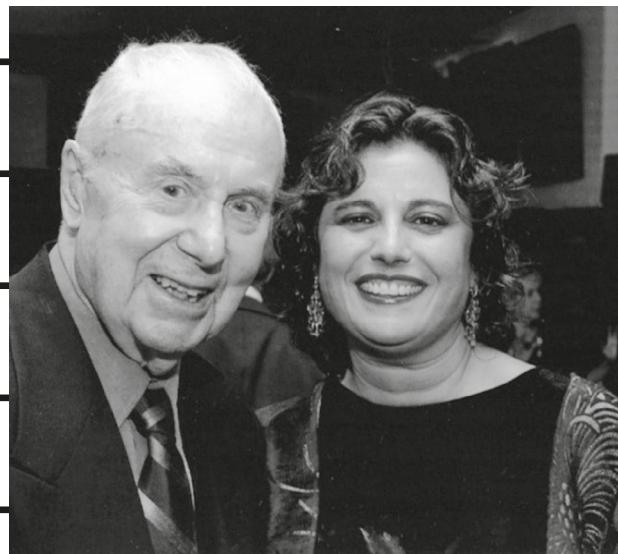
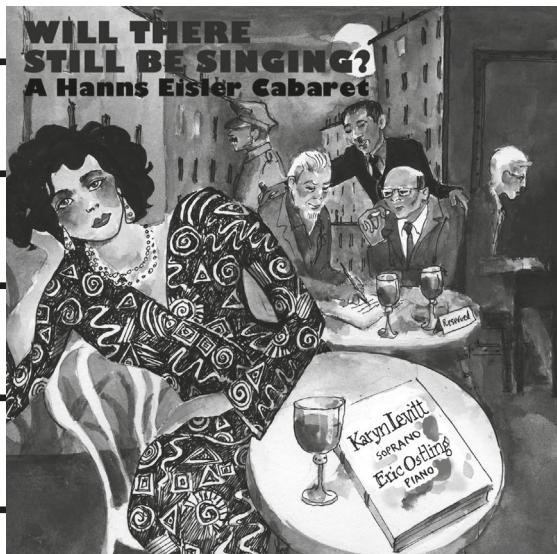
The way I would put it is: there is so much meaning. It’s so meaningful—Brecht’s poetry. And the honesty with which Eisler set his words. It’s the perfect medium for the message. The combination of words and music is so perfect. It is so deep and applicable now. In terms of the warmth—I personally have felt, since the beginning of this project, that there is some kind of redemptive aspect to it. Maybe for Eisler, maybe for Eric Bentley. For me, too.

*How do you perform differently for the show? How is the experience different from the CD?*

My approach is to tell the audience a lot about Hanns Eisler. Because American audiences are much more familiar with Kurt Weill who, you know, contributed to the *Great American Songbook*. Eisler has been erased. People don’t know the name because of his [forced departure]. He’s really a casualty of the Cold War politics in this country. We give a lot of context. We tell people about Hanns Eisler was, what his work was—working with Brecht. The show is about his journey, as much as you can say in an hour. We use his music with mostly Brecht’s words to lay out his journey. It is not an explanation of what the songs are, but it’s putting the songs in the context of his story.

*Eisler was someone who returned to songs, reworked music. Your CD kind of plays with this notion of letting the songs have their own order. What does the order mean to you?*

The theme has always been dark times. The message really comes from that Brecht poem “Spruch 1939.” That is the theme of our album, that is the theme of our show. And the order? Be-



cause these songs have such a strong narrative, the order of songs on the album revealed itself.

*You take some liberties within the compositions on the recording. Can you talk a little bit about how these relate to your work as a lyric soprano and cabaret artist? What invited you to play with the music that way?*

This is the kind of music it is. Take a look at Eric Bentley's *Brecht-Eisler Song Book*. In the notes on the music by Earl Robinson he writes, "As Eisler once said, workers don't carry a piano around with them." Our take—which may be at odds with a musicologist's approach—is that many of these songs are theater songs. We thought that for an album appealing mainly to English-speaking audiences that we should make it as accessible as possible. I have wondered for a while about these songs of Eisler's that have no intro. Some of these songs are so short that they're over before you know it. In the context of a show, if the song goes by too quickly you think, "What was that!?" If you're hearing the music for the first time, with an intro you get to hear the melody before and then you can really listen when the voice comes in. We felt they were very much in keeping with the songs for which we made those changes.

*You've frequently mentioned the fact that these songs are about "dark times" and about articulating a particular relevance for these songs in the present. Is there a particular song that exemplifies this connection to contemporary issues?*

None of these songs are limited to the historical context in which they were written. The only thing that changes ... is the date as the French say! As Brecht wrote: "Yes, there will be singing about the dark times"—that's the ultimate affirmation. The human voice—which is emblematic of the human spirit—will continue. There is a light in the darkness and that has to do with human spirit.

*It's so important to have that line sung instead of just spoken, too.*

This is a two-line poem. But as a piece of music, it expands. That's what music does, it expands a statement. So that you as the receiver can digest it. It's "exploding the dot." It goes into the whole world.

*When you sing in English, how does that feel? I know it's a part of connecting to your publics—but your performance is different from a lot of the other English performances which are more theatrical, more untrained in their style.*

This is a very flexible repertoire. I see our CD as not strictly classical, and I wouldn't call it strictly cabaret. I would call it classical-crossover. The music is demanding, and I picked the music in part thinking about what I could get across, what messages I could get across and what songs spoke to me, as an artist. Whether you think of a wonderful song like the "Love Market," which is a great theater song, or "Truly I live in a time of darkness," which is this atonal masterpiece. But I hope these songs come across as something that one can listen to even though they're hard to get.

We also sing in English because we want to introduce this music to people who have never heard it before. How else to do this besides sing it in the vernacular. Otherwise you're performing for a very small, audience. It is a rarefied audience in America who know German lieder—and that is too small an audience. We want to create an audience, because we feel these songs if they are heard in English can be received today.

Putting together this cabaret show, "Will there still be singing? A Hanns Eisler Cabaret"—we wrote it more about Hanns Eisler's life and put the songs in the context of his journey. In our new show we do about one-third of the program in German. Some verses, some entire songs. So it's more of a combination. With Eric Bentley you have an extraordinary poet and translator. What he has done so seamlessly is that he has taken music, composed to the cadences of German poetry, translated that poetry into English, retrofitted it back into the music ... and made it sound like it was written in English.

*Let's talk a little bit more about your work with Eric Bentley. Did you talk about the poetry with him?*

Our coaching sessions were mainly on the poetry and how to get the message across. This had to do with reporting. He would say, "You've experienced something that was absolutely horrible. But it was a long time ago. And now you're reporting on it." That means that you are not in the grips of it, you're not taken over by it. In Brecht's theatre you have something truly illuminating going on—not just literally with stage lights—but the actors are in the darkness of their world without being of the darkness of their world. They are able to step out and tell you

Karyn Levitt with Eric Bentley (left)  
and Eric Ostling (right)



about it. Not dispassionately. Not as if it doesn't hurt. Or as my acting teacher would always explain it in the words of *Dragnet*, "Just the facts, ma'am." It's not enveloped in a world of passion.

*How did Eric Bentley work with you on musical performance?*

He gave us a lot of advice in those first one and a half years. Take the song, "Easter Sunday." We got to that ladder in the middle—"Where I was writing verse in which I pointed at the men who were preparing a war, which must destroy this country, and my people, and this continent of Europe, and my family, and me." The orders of magnitude on which this war was operating. Musically, Eric Bentley wanted us to have a whole expansion of that section, which is why he gave us the proverbial "railroad tracks" [a held silence – AFB] after "this continent of Europe." That's not in the score.

*There's a lot of that trepidation in his recordings of the songs, too.*

He's interpreted these songs. What a unique performer he is. Here he is, this playwright, translator. Brilliant translator of these songs: playing—accompanying himself singing them.

*Not that many people have worked so closely with Eric Bentley. How would you describe him as a coach and teacher?*

First of all, I would say that he's incredibly generous. He took us under his wing. He's very patient, but completely unsentimental. Truly a Brechtian [*laughs*]. I really had to wring out any romanticism from my past experiences. He had a deep effect on me, made a lot of demands of me, as an actress. He's a lyricist and he's concerned about his words being heard. That is about the meaning of the words, of those statements—how they add up for an audience.

I did so much study over the five years. I read every single play. I did character studies of all the characters whose songs I sang. Of course I read Eric Bentley's criticism of the plays. I read the poetry—Brecht, Goethe, Heine, Eichendorff, Anakreon, Karl Kraus, Peter Altenberg. I read Hanns Eisler. His *Composing for the Films*. Albrecht Betz's *Hanns Eisler: Political Musician*. I saw some of the films. I worked on all the songs with my acting coach as well. We brought them in as scenes. I also had my own personal quest to figure out what the greatest singers—who are living today—are *doing*. The people whom I admire, who have had an incredible influence on me are: Teresa Stratas, Ute

Lemper, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Frank Sinatra, and, most recently, Jonas Kaufmann. Kaufmann exemplifies what Eric Bentley was teaching me. It has to do with this Italian word: *parlando*.

*Parlando* is exactly what Frank Sinatra did. Sinatra is one of the great interpreters of American song. Yes, he changed some of songs' rhythms. To make the songs talk to you. To talk to you. That's exactly what Jonas Kaufmann does. It's as if he is talking to you through the music. You have a human being talking to you, which happens to come out in poetry, in this particular language, with these particular notes. It's a stunning thing. It doesn't happen very often. Eric Bentley used that word—*parlando*—and said, from the beginning, listen to Frank Sinatra. These are pearls of wisdom.

*For all of your project's chilling content, there is such artistic warmth.*

The way I would put it is: there is so much meaning. It's so meaningful—Brecht's poetry. And the honesty with which Eisler set his words. It's the perfect medium for the message. The combination of words and music is so perfect. It is so deep and applicable now. In terms of the warmth—I personally have felt, since the beginning of this project, that there is some kind of redemptive aspect to it. Maybe for Eisler, maybe for Eric Bentley. For me, too.

*Is your album's title—Eric Bentley's Brecht-Eisler Song Book—a way of honoring him?*

Absolutely. We were doing his translations. And that was the name of our show. We wanted to have his name front and center.

*What advice do you have for singers interested in exploring Eisler? Or audience members who just want to learn more?*

If somebody is smitten with Eisler after hearing us perform, I would send them to listen to Eric Bentley's recordings. To listen to Matthias Goerne's recordings. To listen to Gisela May's recordings. To read some of the Brecht plays that Eisler composed music for. And also to listen to Eisler's chamber music. And of course to buy our CD, which is unique.

## EISLER-TERMINE

4. November 2016, Brooklyn, New York (USA)

### **Hollywooder Liederbuch**

Aufführung des kompletten *Hollywooder Liederbuches* mit Christina Bachrach (Sopran), Nils Neubert (Tenor), Matthew Patrick Morris (Bariton), Michael Brofman und Miori Sugiyama (Klavier); Brooklyn Historical Society; 19.30 Uhr

5. November 2016, New York (USA)

### **Will There Still Be Singing? A Hanns Eisler Cabaret**

Karyn Levitt (Gesang), William Schimmel (Akkordeon), Ira Siegel (Gitarre), Eric Ostling (Klavier); Metropolitan Room; 13 Uhr (weitere Vorstellung am selben Ort: 9. Januar 2017, 19 Uhr); siehe auch Kasten auf Seite 47

8., 12. und 18. November 2016, Saarbrücken

### **Gegen die Dummheit – Hanns Eisler heute**

Ein Hanns-Eisler-Programm mit Horst Maria Merz (Gesang), Stefan Litwin (Klavier, Konzept und musikalische Leitung), Saarländisches Staatsorchester, Schauspieler des Saarländischen Staatstheaters und Studierende der Hochschule für Musik Saar; Alte Feuerwache/Saarländisches Staatstheater Saarbrücken; 19.30 Uhr

15. November 2016, Kiew (Ukraine)

### **Schulhoff, Messiaen, Eisler**

Von Eisler die *Kriegskantate* op. 65, die *Kantate auf den Tod eines Genossen* op. 64 und die *Kantate im Exil* op. 62; Liesbeth Devos (Sopran), Het Collectief mit Thomas Dieltjens (Klavier), Wibert Aerts (Violine), Vincent Hepp (Viola), Martijn Vink (Cello), Jonathan Focquaert (Kontrabass), Julien Hervé (Klarinette), Nele Delafonteyne (Klarinette); Nationale Philharmonie der Ukraine; 20 Uhr

22. - 24. November 2016, Berlin

### **Die Mutter**

Inszenierung von Brechts Stück *Die Mutter* mit Musik von Hanns Eisler; Peter Kleinert (Regie), mit Ursula Werner und

Ja, ich möchte Mitglied der Internationalen Hanns Eisler Gesellschaft e.V. (IHEG) werden.

Yes, I would like to join the International Hanns Eisler Society.

Antwort per Post oder per Fax an /

Send form by post or fax to (+49) (0)30 / 612 804 63

**Internationale  
Hanns Eisler Gesellschaft e.V.  
Eisenbahnstraße 21  
10997 Berlin**  
**G E R M A N Y**

Studierenden der Hochschule „Ernst Busch“, Mark Scheibe (Musikalische Leitung); Schaubühne Berlin; 19.30 Uhr

3. Dezember 2016, Berlin

### **Workshop und Abschlusskonzert Eisler+**

Studierende der Hochschule für Musik Saar und der Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eisler spielen u.a. Werke von Hanns Eisler, Leitung: Anita Keller, Prof. Stefan Litwin, Prof. Wolfram Rieger; Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eisler, Studiosaal; Workshop 11 Uhr, Konzert 19 Uhr

5. Dezember 2016, Wien (Österreich)

### **Amsterdam Sinfonietta / Hampson**

Vokalkunst von Beethoven bis in das 20. Jahrhundert, u. a. Eislers *Ernste Gesänge*; Amsterdam Sinfonietta, Thomas Hampson (Bariton); Wiener Konzerthaus, Großer Saal; 19.30 Uhr (weitere Vorstellung: 7. Dezember 2016; Philharmonie Essen; 20 Uhr)

17. Dezember, Paris (Frankreich)

### **Eisler, Dreznin, Pierné**

Von Eisler das *Septett Nr. 2*; Nicolas Dautricourt (Violine), Musiker des Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France; Maison de Radio France, Studio 104; 18 Uhr

26. Dezember 2016, Berlin

### **Eisler on the Beach**

Eine kommunistische Familienaufstellung mit Musik von Hanns Eisler mit der Bolschewistischen Kurkapelle Schwarz Rot; Regie: Tom Kühnel und Jürgen Kuttner; Deutsches Theater; 19.30 Uhr

14. Januar 2017, Zürich (Schweiz)

### **Kino im Kopf**

Filmmusik-Bearbeitungen, u. a. Eislers Suite Nr. 3 aus dem Film *Kuhle Wampe* in einer Bearbeitung von Steffen Schleiemacher; Collegium Novum Zürich, Peter Rundel (Dirigent); Tonhalle, Großer Saal; 20 Uhr

Vor- und Zuname / Full name

Geburtsdatum / Date of birth

Straße / Street

PLZ, Ort, Land / City, Postcode, Country

Telefon, Fax, E-Mail / Phone, Fax, Email

Jahresbeitrag / Annual membership fee:

- 62 Euro: Ordentliches Mitglied / Regular member
- 124 Euro: Förderndes Mitglied / Contributing member
- 31 Euro: Ermäßiger Beitrag / Reduced membership fee

Datum, Unterschrift / Date, signature

29. Januar 2017, Werder

### **Liebe Arbeit Exil – Weill/Eisler-Liederabend**

Szenisch-musikalischer Abend mit Anna von Schrottenberg (Schauspiel, Gesang), Matt Rubenstein (Klavier); Comédie Soleil; 19.30 Uhr (weitere Vorstellungen: 2. März 2017, Mendelssohn Remise Berlin; 10. März Kurt Weill Festival Dessau)

24. Februar 2017, Stuttgart

### **Die Maßnahme**

Premiere des Lehrstücks von Bertolt Brecht und Hanns Eisler; Thomas Schmauser (Regie); Spielstätte „Nord“ des Schauspiels Stuttgart

30. März 2017, Leipzig

### **Die Maßnahme / Die Perser**

Premiere einer Bearbeitung des Lehrstücks *Die Maßnahme* mit Musik von Hanns Eisler und des antiken Dramas *Die Perser* von Aischylos; Enrico Lübbe (Regie), Schauspiel Leipzig; 19.30 Uhr

## **UNSER NÄCHSTES HEFT / NEXT ISSUE**

Das nächste Heft der *Eisler-Mitteilungen* erscheint im April 2017.

Erstmals nach über 30 Nummern wird es dann keinen Themenhauptpunkt mehr geben. Abgesehen davon, dass dieses editorische Konzept mittlerweile an seine natürlichen Grenzen stößt, erscheint eine größere thematische Öffnung und Flexibilität erstrebenswert. Beiträge zu den verschiedensten Bereichen mit Bezug zu Hanns Eisler und seiner Musik sind willkommen; eine verstärkte Kontextualisierung des Komponisten ist dabei ausdrücklich erwünscht.

Themenvorschläge bitte bis 30. Dezember an die Redaktion, Redaktionsschluss: 31. Januar 2017 (deadline for proposals: 30 December, editorial deadline: 31 January 2017).

## **A HANNS EISLER CABARET – FROM NYC TO BERLIN**

### **Brecht-Eisler Songs in English – not only for English speaking audiences / Lieder von Brecht und Eisler auf Englisch – nicht nur für englischsprachiges Publikum**

American soprano Karyn Levitt and her pianist Eric Ostling bring Brecht and Eisler's songs back to Berlin – in English translations by Eric Bentley, who celebrated his 100th birthday in New York on 14 September 2016.

Die amerikanische Sopranistin Karyn Levitt und ihr Pianist Eric Ostling bringen die Lieder von Brecht und Eisler zurück nach Berlin – in den englischen Übersetzungen von Eric Bentley, der am 14. September 2016 in New York seinen 100. Geburtstag gefeiert hat.



Karyn Levitt und Eric Ostling bei einem Brecht-Eisler-Konzert in New York, 2016

**Will there still be singing? A Hanns Eisler Cabaret / Karyn Levitt & Eric Ostling**  
**Thursday, 16 March 2017, 8 pm / Donnerstag, 16. März 2017, 20 Uhr**  
**Literaturforum im Brecht-Haus, Chausseestraße 125, 10115 Berlin (Mitte)**

We reserve the right to make changes. / Änderungen vorbehalten. / [www.lfbrechth.de](http://www.lfbrechth.de) / [www.hanns-eisler.de](http://www.hanns-eisler.de)