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CDs

ERIC BENTLEY'S *BRECHT-EISLER SONG BOOK*. KARYN LEVITT (SOPRANO), ERIC OSTLING (PIANO). RAVEN RECORDS (2016).

Among the most important new friends made by Bertolt Brecht and Hanns Eisler during their often frustrating and troubled period of exile in California in the early 1940s was Eric Bentley, a young Englishman whom they met in the winter of 1941/42 and who was to become one of their most distinguished collaborators. However it was not until 1967, long after the scourge of McCarthyism had expedited their return from the USA to Europe, where they had died in 1956 and 1962 respectively, that Bentley published the book which represents the main flowering of their joint work: *Eric Bentley's Brecht-Eisler Song Book*. Dedicated to Georg Eisler and Wolf Biermann, this volume is described on its title-page as “[f]orty-two songs in German and English, edited, with singable translations and introductory notes by Eric Bentley”. In striving for translations which are ‘singable’ Bentley no doubt took some liberties with the original, for example when rendering “das Weib” as “the wise woman” throughout his version of ‘Ballade vom Weib und dem Soldaten’. Brecht scholars may have serious reservations about such changes, just as Brecht himself reportedly had mixed feelings about revisions made to his texts and to their titles by Eisler himself when he was putting Brecht’s words to music. Timed to mark Bentley’s hundredth birthday in 2016, Karyn Levitt’s new CD triumphantly demonstrates, however, that Bentley’s versions certainly achieved the singability at which he aimed while also respecting the fundamental spirit of Bert Brecht’s work.

Fourteen of the CD’s eighteen songs are taken from Bentley’s volume; these are supplemented by a further four of Bentley’s Brecht translations. Sophisticated *Lieder*, popular songs and ballads are all represented. Three of Eisler’s *Massenlieder* are also included but, intriguingly, not in a sung version but as powerful piano improvisations by Eric Ostling. Karyn Levitt’s interpretation of the songs combines impressive technical competence with an unusual degree of emotional intelligence and sensitivity. Her skilful interpretation of songs and ballads such as ‘And what did she get?’ (‘Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib?’) provides just one particularly striking example of the exceptionally high degree of accomplishment which characterises the entire CD, even where Bentley appears not to achieve the singability that was his ideal. Writing in *Eisler-Mitteilungen* 61, the Eisler-expert Peter Deeg notes, for instance, that Bentley “clearly had difficulties distributing the syllables meaningfully over the extremely long and melancholic melissmas at the end of each strophe” in his 1960 setting of ‘The Plum Tree’ (‘Der Pflaumenbaum’), yet Karyn Levitt is able to achieve great poetic beauty by “blending the words and the music to form an artful and contradictory whole, at once unusual and touching.”

In sum, Brecht, Eisler and Bentley have been extremely well served by these landmark recordings of a *Song Book* which can itself lay claim to a place of major importance in the œuvre of all three men.

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