

SEARCH



WILL THERE STILL BE SINGING? A HANNS EISLER CABARET

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CABARET, MUSIC

At a time in history when the subject of the day is exile, American soprano Karyn Levitt has chosen a worthy example to build a one-woman cabaret show around. On October 15, in Manhattan's Metropolitan Room, she presented her musical valentine for Hanns Eisler, the Astro-German composer who was a contemporary of Kurt Weill.

With her colleagues pianist Eric Ostling, accordionist William Schimmel, and guitarist Ira Siegel, Levitt sang a collection of Eisler's art and theatre songs (with lyrics by Bertolt Brecht) which were translated by the esteemed English critic, playwright, editor and Brecht translator, Eric Bentley, who is very much alive, having just celebrated his 100th birthday.

While Weill's indelible mark on the canon of Weimar era composition is indisputable, Eisler was not far behind, despite being hidden in Weill's dust for too long. His music, especially now in the time of exile all over the globe, bears repeating for its prescience and intelligence. Levitt's lovingly crafted "Will There Be Singing (In the Time of Darkness)" plunges us into the heart of yesteryears' issues that are now (still) the evening news.

Eisler, a student of Schoenberg who wrote scores for the plays of Brecht and others, never achieved the status of Weill, probably due to his never having composed a tune that stuck in the public's memory. However, Levitt makes a credible case for paying some overdue accolades for Eisler's considerable opus, most of which are songs that carry political punch and a pungent underscoring of mankind's unfortunate penchant for nastiness.

Eisler escaped the Nazis in Europe and fled to Mexico and the U.S., but was blacklisted by the

latter when he was suspected of being a Communist during the mid-century purge by Congress' Committee on Un-American Activities. He returned to Berlin to work with the Berliner Ensemble, but he was once again affected deeply by repression and the "dark times" he had described in his 1939 song: "In the dark times, tell me: Will there be singing? Yes, there will be singing: About the dark times."

So beginning with an a cappella rendition of "Truly, I live in a time of darkness," a song he wrote during his Mexican exile, Levitt's delivery started out in the shadows — no spotlight on her as she walked among us, singing the tricky chromaticism with a carefully guarded tempo that suggested an ominous warning. Levitt spoke eloquently between songs about the composer and his zig-zag trajectory between continents, and pointed out how, despite the dollops of obvious irony and occasional 12-tone modalities in his work, his emotional quotient still revealed itself. His "In the Flower Garden" which she explained took place the balmy climate of Los Angeles during his Hollywood period, was a wistful paean to lighter, less tragic times in his life.

But the strongest material came from those songs connected to warlike circumstances where people marshaled their courage to combat injustice. "Solidarity Song," "East German National Anthem," and "Forwards..." ("...end the rule of sword and gun") reflected the militaristic marches, and "There's Nothing Quite Like Money," "Love Market," and "Karlsplatz" spoke of wartime's black markets and back-room fleshpots. And to send tribute to Bentley at his century mark, "To My Little Radio," lightened the cosmic load a bit with bittersweet remembrance of the simple electrical device that connected Eisler – and Bentley for that matter – to the world for so many decades of upheaval, no matter where they were.

Levitt and her musical colleagues will bring their Brecht-Eisler show to Berlin in March 2017. For information: royalroadproductions.com





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