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As 20th-century composers go, Hanns Eisler is doing very well. Literature on the composer is expanding vibrantly, on both sides of the Atlantic, and transcending language boundaries. It is easy to see why. Eisler’s multifaceted output and colourful life are fascinating and invite multiple approaches, interpretations, and readings. Eisler survived two world wars and numerous political systems, becoming a political refugee twice over in the process. He was one of Schoenberg’s outstanding pupils, worked at the forefront of Hollywood, and, as author of a national anthem (of a now deceased nation, the GDR), likely ranks amongst the 20th-century’s most performed composers. It is not my intention to categorise the wide diversity of literature on the composer, although it is notable that these multidimensional layers offer scholars opportunities either to explore specific elements of Eisler’s life and work (e.g. Bick, Composers on the Cultural Front, diss., Yale 2001 and Weber, I’m not a Hero, I’m a Composer, Hildesheim, 2012) or adopt more overarching, biographical approaches (e.g. Wißmann, Hanns Eisler, Munich 2012, Bohlman & Bohlman, Hanns Eisler, Berlin 2012, and Hennenberg, Hanns Eisler, Mainz 2017).

Heidi Hart’s contribution is a welcome addition to the burgeoning Eisler literature. While Eisler’s songs feature in many, if not indeed most, of the existing literature, overall attention to this part of his creative output is not spread evenly. For example, many scholars foreground the songs Eisler wrote while in California during the late 1930s and early 1940s and often concentrate on settings of texts by Bertolt Brecht. Conversely, Hart positions Eisler’s lieder as one evolving body of work and sets out to provide in-depth discussions of the songs as they span the composer’s long and varied career. Hart follows a chronological timeline that roughly carves chapters into the places on Eisler’s long migratory journey and her writing is alert to the composer’s changing contexts. The first of the five chapters addresses Eisler’s early lieder in his native Vienna, spanning the time until his move to Berlin in 1925 and encompassing his years as a Schoenberg pupil. These include the 1917 Galgenlieder to texts by Christian Morgenstern, the Six Songs for Voice and Piano (1922, various authors), and three Heine settings for a cappella male choir (1925), which Hart acknowledges are not lieder, but which she includes because they signal his shift towards a more activist political approach.

Interestingly, Hart makes short shrift of Eisler’s time in Berlin during the Weimar Republic. Instead, her book’s second chapter focusses for the most part on Eisler’s collaboration with Brecht during their early years as refugees from Nazi Germany. Specifically, Hart concentrates on Eisler’s second setting of Brecht’s poem, An die Nachgeborenen, which she describes as a triptych that is marked by the combination of a loose return to dodecaphonic techniques with allusions to Baroque and Romantic music. The third chapter discusses Eisler’s Hölderlin Fragmente, composed during the years in Hollywood with the aim, in Hart’s view, of reclaiming the poet from Nazi ideology. Hölderlin returns centre stage in the last chapter, which I found the most tightly written and successful of the book. Hart explores how Eisler’s late Ernste Gesänge (1962) represent a renewed engagement with Hölderlin (alongside Berthold Viertel and Helmut Richter) while simultaneously recalling Brahms’ late Ernste Gesänge, thus almost emerging like an elegy for the composer’s disillusionment with the GDR.

Beginning just before Eisler’s effective deportation from the USA, chapter 4 centres on his early years in the nascent GDR. Here, the poet of interest is Goethe, and Hart debates the extent to which Eisler’s intent to compose for a Socialist society clashed with party political demands and pressures. (These clashes later led to Eisler abandoning another Goethe setting, the opera project, Doktor Faustus.) Hart raises a crucial question here. Eisler engaged
throughout much of his life with the question as to how a thoroughly bourgeois tradition such as that of the lied might be integrated into the socialist world he fought hard to realise. The central example, the \textit{Rhapsody} (1949) to texts by Goethe’s \textit{Faust II}, is no doubt a notable choice. As a piece for soprano and large orchestra, the instrumentation, at least, departs considerably from earlier definitions of the term lied. Alongside the \textit{Ernste Gesänge} and the Heine settings for male choir, it is intriguing that Hart chooses repertoire that might not be conceived of as lieder at all, at least if one adopted a narrow definition. I do not find this slight fudge problematic, but I wonder whether it might have been useful for Hart to define more explicitly from the outset what, exactly, she means by the terms art song and lied.

Terminology matters here, for much of the Eisler literature terms the pieces that form the centre of Hart’s discussion songs, thus discursively distancing the repertory from the Germanic lied tradition. Conversely, Hart deliberately uses the descriptors art songs and lied. Specifically, Hart sees Eisler’s lieder as a continued interrogation of the composer’s German-ness, as personal responses to, and engagements with, what being German meant for him. This, indeed, is the core concern of the book. Before the varied contexts and different places Eisler encountered and interacted with, his songs thus emerge as a red thread that showcases an evolving but sustained line of intellectual engagement. In so doing, Hart’s approach foregrounds commonalities and overarching threads rather than emphasising change. The overarching emphasis on placing Eisler within German tradition has perhaps influenced Hart’s decision as to which lyricists to exclude. While it is no doubt the case that Eisler overwhelmingly set music to German texts, not all of these were by German authors. The work of Ignazio Silone, for example, features prominently in Eisler’s music of the late 1930s and early 1940s, notably in the seven cantatas of 1937 and the \textit{Deutsche Sinfonie}, perhaps Eisler’s magnum opus, albeit in German translation. Silone makes no appearance in Hart’s book.

At the same time, Hart is always alert to Eisler’s environs. Indeed, throughout her book, she emphasises that Eisler’s art songs ought to be read not as escapist or solipsistic laments, for example, but as interventionist artworks full of agency that deliberately position themselves against the background of the German lieder tradition. Hart is well placed to do so. Combining equal expertise in German and music studies, her book does a very fine job balancing both disciplines. For me, as a musicologist, passages of familiar disciplinary territory were interspersed with less familiar but insightful discussions, notably on Goethe and Hölderlin. I can only suspect that colleagues in German studies will find reading her book equally rewarding from the opposite angle.

Perhaps it is this bi-disciplinarity that stands behind Hart’s strategy to zoom in and out frequently in her narrative. This is so much so that Eisler sometimes disappears from view. The narrative of the chapter on Hölderlin, for example, subdivides into three sections. The section following an introduction focusses on the conflicting Hölderlin interpretations of Heidegger and Adorno, and illuminatingly so, but never mentions Eisler. The chapter’s third section, conversely, offers a very close and detailed line-by-line reading of Eisler’s \textit{Hölderlin Fragmente}. Elsewhere, Hart offers sections that provide welcome cultural-historical context. For example, passages from the first chapter that serve as useful descriptions of fin-de-siècle Vienna contrast with a detailed discussion of Eisler’s 1917 \textit{Galgenlieder}, set to texts by Christian Morgenstern. Readers may at times struggle to follow Hart’s very close readings without access to a full score and recording. Not all of these are easily obtainable, and in some places, I wished that inclusion of musical examples had been more generous. Reading
the book cover to cover, I found that the fragmentary approach can at times make for less than fluent reading, even though individual passages are highly effective.

Ultimately, these are minor quibbles that do not detract from the overall success of Heidi Hart’s book. Her achievement to provide an insightful overview of Eisler’s lied oeuvre throughout the composer’s career, from the early Morgenstern songs to the late Hölderlin settings, makes this an important contribution to the Eisler literature. Indeed, it is her discussions of the less-frequently discussed repertory that stand out here. They showcase two things. First, that there is much left to discover and discuss in Hanns Eisler’s music. And second, that one of the most fascinating chapters of the long history of the lied plays out in the 20th century.