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Three books on Hanns Eisler

Wes Blomster
University of Colorado

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REVIEWS

A Rebel in Music: Selected Writings. Ed. by Manfred Grabs. Berlin: Seven Seas Books. 1978. 223 pages.

Hanns Eisler im USA-Exil: Zu den politischen, ästhetischen und kompositorischen Positionen des Komponisten 1938 bis 1948. Literatur und Gesellschaft. By Jürgen Schebera. Berlin: Akademie Verlag. 1978. 234 pages.

Hanns Eisler--Werk und Edition: eine Dokumentation. Arbeitsheft 28. By Manfred Grabs. Berlin: Akademie der Künste der DDR. 1978. 110 pages + 60 plates.

Hanns Eisler (1898-1962) commands attention through his extensive musical output which extended over four decades and embraced every type of composition--including the Kampflieder of the 1920's--and through his verbal product--essays, lectures, and letters--which discusses in theory his endeavor to create in praxis a music in the service of socialism. Eisler is also of concern through his close personal and creative association with Bert Brecht. Further, increasing attention is now focused upon two dialectic positions in which the composer stands: in his musical works he is the antagonist to the "conservative revolutionary" Arnold Schoenberg--whose student he was following the first war--and in the sociology of music he counters the figure in that field, Theodor Adorno. Finally, Eisler resided in the USA from 1938 to 1948, when he was "permitted" to leave by the House Unamerican Activities Committee; he is, consequently, a sad chapter in the history of McCarthyism.

The Seven Seas paperback offers 32 essays by Eisler, assembled and introduced by Manfred Grabs, Director of the Eisler Archive in the GDR Akademie der Künste. The anthology makes available in translation a comprehensive picture of Eisler's concern for the relation between art and politics.

In his account of Eisler's American years, Schebera sets out to shape "einen Baustein zum marxistischen Eislerbild". Eisler's American decade--despite the miseries of exile, perhaps the

most productive of his life--deserves particular consideration because of his rather unique position as a composer of Marxist faith actively engaged in this country in composing, teaching--largely at the New York New School--and in the production of Hollywood films. The limitation of the book lies in Schebera's restriction of his research to materials in the Eisler Archive; it is regrettable that he was not able to work on the scene in the United States, searching out those now aged people with whom Eisler was in contact here. The opening survey of world history--relating how the United States reneged in its war-time obligations to the Soviet Union after 1942 and landed in Normandy only after the Red Army had won the war--is somewhat one-dimensional. The book is of value as the first detailed treatment of Eisler's American domicile, and it indicates directions to be pursued in more detailed research. A quarter of the book is taken by the translation of Eisler's testimony before HUAC, available in English in the publications of the Committee and in Eric Bentley's Thirty Years of Treason (New York, 1971). Grab's Arbeitsheft is far more than the documentation modestly suggested in the subtitle. The knowledge and able hand of the archivist has sifted through all the materials at his disposal--much of which is still unpublished--and assembled a wide range of information concerning the editing and publication of Eisler's work, both musical and verbal. In his introductory "Zur gesellschaftlichen Notwendigkeit der Eisler Gesamtausgabe", Grabs establishes an editorial perspective determined largely by the political commitment of the artist. Of greatest interest to the non-musician is Series III which offers "Schriften und Dokumente". Three volumes of this are now in print: Schriften 1924-1948; Gespräche mit Hans Bunge and Komposition für den Film. The Arbeitsheft contains a detailed chronology of Eisler's life and work, followed by sixty pages which reproduce photos, sketches, cartoons and selected pages of Eisler manuscripts. Eisler--like Brecht--would have been 80 this year; appropriate commemorations in the GDR will result in further additions to the Eisler literature soon.

Wes Blomster
University of Colorado