

## Botstein's Journey To The East

New York Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Centre 01/25/2009 - **Music of the Other Germany: Hanns Eisler: *Hymn of the German Democratic Republic* – *Goethe Rhapsody* (U.S. premiere) Rudolf Wagner-Régeny: *Mythological Creatures* (U.S. premiere) Paul Dessau: *In Memoriam Bertolt Brecht* (U.S. premiere) Udo Zimmermann: *Sinfonia: Great Lament in Memory of Federico García Lorca* (U.S. premiere) Siegfried Matthus: *Response: Concerto for Orchestra* (New York premiere)**

Marjorie Owens (soprano), Benjamin Herman (Timpani) American Symphony Orchestra, Leon Botstein (Music Director and Conductor)

Like Christopher Columbus, conductor Leon Botstein doesn't need to actually create new worlds. He is an indefatigable explorer for *lost* worlds of music which have not seen the light of day for many decades. Yesterday afternoon, Maestro Botstein and the American Symphony Orchestra, uncovered a quintet of composers which—thanks to the American Cold War Propaganda Department—are barely known at all.

We who grew up in the 1950's thought that the music of Communist East Germany had to be as drab, uniform and single-mindedly jingoistic as the supposed politics and architecture of the country. We might have known Hanns Eisler as a one-time Hollywood movie composer who was "forced" to work in his homeland. And Paul Dessau? A good communist who composed music for Bertolt Brecht (but Kurt Weill, who emigrated to American *had* to have been much better, ya?)

Well, actually no. For Mr. Botstein showed secret faces of these same composers as well as three others, who ranged from the academic to the incredibly futuristic. True, they never took on Schoenberg's 12-tone-scale wholesale, but equally true, they were not forced to write music for the "proletariat". Instead, this quintet showed dazzling individuality without apparently receiving official reprimands, as in the Soviet Union. Of the five works, the most amazing was Udo Zimmermann's *Lament for Federico García Lorca*, composed 32 years ago but breathlessly reflecting today. The first movement is nothing less than a cadenza for timpani, performed with enormous excitement by Benjamin Herman. But it was the second movement which combined the spectral sound of Murail with the complexity of Penderecki. It began with mournful notes in the lowest bass and celli, gradually picking up colors from an enormous battery of percussion, strings, and the full orchestra. The result was a very very slow whirling of orchestral colors, partly improvised (or so it seemed from the bowings of the violins) with interruptions by timpani and even more sounds in their own cosmos.

It was a longish but always remarkable musical movement, followed by what had to have been the ultimate lament for the Spanish poet who was gunned down in Spain. Yes, he was a hero in East Germany, but Zimmermann's lament transcended any ideology. Equally momentous, in an entirely different way was an orchestral concerto called "Responses" by Siegfried Matthus, totally unknown to this writer. The "response" was a three-movement series of quotations based around Stravinsky's *Sacre*. But wait, *Were* they quotes?? The secret of this gorgeous (and sometimes very funny) piece was that nothing was *exactly* quoted, but everything sounded like a quote. Could we call it a paraphrase? A translation? An incarnation? Whatever the terminology, Mr. Matthus, using the Stravinsky as a model used a few measures of *faux-Weber*, Mendelssohn, a near *Till Eulenspiegel* call, and several other "responses" to music we know so well. The finale was modeled on (but not quoting) Brahms' *Fourth Symphony* chaconne, ending with some dazzling orchestration. The best known composer, Hanns Eisler, contributed two vocal works, sung with quasi-Teutonic passion by American soprano Marjorie Owens. The first was one of the East German national anthems, which varied from march-militancy to peaceful bucolic. (I expected a few old Marxists in the audience to stand up or walk out, but everybody was quite sedately seated.) The other Eisler, based on a verse by Goethe, was a triumphant piece of vocalism, sung with equal Germanic confidence. The one disappointing work was a dry Hindemith-sounding work by the academic Rudolf Wagner-Régeny. The only work I had heard before was Paul Dessau's Brecht memorial. Dessau had written many of Brecht's tunes (and he used one for the song of war here). **The piece was mournful, jaunty at times, but—like the other pieces here—rather electrifying** In sum, Mr. Botstein has again outdone himself in his theme, his program, and his execution. **For the American Symphony Orchestra is easily living up to the color and creativity of its founder, Leopold Stokowski.** Yesterday, Mr. Botstein's choices tore apart the curtain of East Germany and revealed inspirations not strait-jacketed by either Western trends or Eastern commissars. For that alone, the conductor has proved to be a visionary explorer indeed.

Harry Rolnick