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Red Composer-In-Chief: Hanns Eisler
One respected composer's battle against the HUAC.

By James Lochner

Published in *Film Score Monthly Online*

April 2009



On March 26, 1948, film composer Hanns Eisler bid a bitter, final farewell to the U.S. from the tarmac at LaGuardia Airport. Austrian-born Eisler (1898-1962), a successful revolutionary composer in Weimar, Germany, had fled the country in 1933 when Hitler came to power. But his exile in the U.S. found him front and center at the beginning of a political storm conducted by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, where Eisler became the first victim of the Hollywood “blacklist.”

*“Once or twice a year I write a motion picture.
It interests me and I need the money.”*

Though he left Germany in 1933, Eisler was not officially admitted to the U.S. until October 1940, and only then thanks primarily to the intervention of letters from Eleanor Roosevelt. After securing a job as professor of music at the New School for Social

Research in New York, the Rockefeller Foundation granted Eisler \$20,000 for research and study of music and films, and the school in turn commissioned him to work on musical scores for the New York Philharmonic. In May 1942, the school gave Eisler a leave of absence to continue his work on the Rockefeller project in California, which later resulted in *Composing for the Films*, written with Theodor Adorno and published in 1947. In August, Eisler left New York to pursue a teaching post at the University of Southern California and to try and earn a living as a film composer in Hollywood.

By the time he arrived in Hollywood, Eisler had already written a dozen film scores in Europe. His score for Joris Ivens's *Song of Heroes* (1932) was adapted into the *Suite No. 4 for Orchestra*, one of four orchestral suites that Eisler composed using material from his film scores. Eisler's first Hollywood film—*Hangmen Also Die* (1943), directed by Fritz Lang and written by friend Bertolt Brecht—told a fictional version of the May 1942 assassination of Reinhard Heydrich (nicknamed “Hitler’s Hangman”), the brutal Nazi commander of occupied Czechoslovakia, and the bloody German reprisal on the citizens of Prague. Communist catchwords like “masses” and “comrades” were expunged from the script, but Eisler managed to smuggle his 1929 tune, “Comintern Song,” into the brief 11-minute score and received an Oscar nomination from an unsuspecting Academy.



Happier Times: A scene from *Hangmen Also Die*.

Eisler's second nomination came the following year for *None But the Lonely Heart*, directed by another friend, Clifford Odets, and starring Cary Grant as a petty thief and Ethel Barrymore as his dying mother. Eisler's score weaves in Tchaikovsky's famous tune, and after seeing the film, Hanns' brother Gerhart wrote in a letter to Hanns: “I found the music delightful except at times I was deceived in certain hopes...Unfortunately, films are not made for music but music for films...In any event

there is certainly no reason to make excuses for the music or the film. And if there were no more unpleasant ways of earning the necessary bread this in no way was the worst and most unpleasant.”

During his tenure in the U.S., Eisler wrote eight film scores and 70 songs, in addition to his teaching. Many of the songs, based on poetry by Brecht, Goethe and others, were later compiled into the song cycle, *Hollywood Songbook*. Eisler’s modest success as a Hollywood film composer enabled him to earn his own living and still allowed him time for “serious work,” whereas other German exiles were dependent on charity. Though Brecht claimed “Hollywood music was ruining his ear,” Eisler’s aural capabilities were the least of his troubles.

*“My subversiveness is that I love my brother.
My crime is that I am trying to defend him.”*

Eisler’s problems began in October 1946 after Louis Budenz, a reformed communist and former editor of *The Daily Worker*, fingered Gerhart Eisler as the “real head of Communism in America.” Since the 1930s, Gerhart had worked in the U.S. as an agent for the Comintern (an international communist organization, which had disbanded in 1935), but had lived as a journalist in New York City for the last five years. Further troubles arose in November when Ruth Fischer, a former German Communist Party organizer and the Eisler brothers’ sister, published a series of articles in William Randolph Hearst’s *Journal American* entitled “The Comintern’s American Agent,” in which she accused both brothers of “bringing communism to Hollywood.” An intense smear campaign in the press quickly followed. Though Gerhart insisted he was not “the boss of all the Reds,” *Time* magazine eventually proclaimed him “the No. 1 U.S. Communist, the Brain, the big tap on the wire to Moscow.”

Gerhart and Ruth were both summoned before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) on February 6, 1947. Fischer testified that Gerhart, whom she had been estranged from for over 20 years, was “the head of a network of agents of the secret Russian state police” and a “dangerous terrorist,” and that Hanns was “a communist in the philosophical sense.” Gerhart’s interrogation was brief. When he refused to be sworn in unless first permitted to read a three-minute statement into the record, chairman J. Parnell Thomas held him in contempt and remanded him to the Washington county jail. Gerhart was released on bail and would later stow away on a Polish freighter bound for London, never to return.

Hanns was publicly vilified as “a party member hack,” “brother of the notorious atom spy,” and “red composer-in-chief.” But the furor that surrounded him had been years in

the making. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had started a file on Eisler when he entered the U.S. for the first time in 1935, tagging him as a potential “security risk.” The photocopies in Eisler’s file ([available online](#) thanks to the Freedom of Information Act) provide fascinating—if frightening—reading. Included in the file are personal correspondence, phone logs, [bank account statements](#), [surveillance memos](#), and the [addresses and phone numbers](#) of Eisler’s friends and acquaintances, many of whom were now suspect.

According to Albrecht Betz, “Artists in Hollywood saw Fischer as a ‘monster’ with psychopathic traits.” But the effect of her testimony effectively brought Eisler’s film career to a swift and immediate end. In the *Los Angeles Daily Examiner*, Eisler remarked that he was “not surprised” that the committee used “my former sister, Miss Fischer, for their activities.” When his good friend Charlie Chaplin heard about Fischer’s actions, he told Eisler, “It’s like Shakespeare in your family.” But the Shakespearean drama was only beginning.

“These men...represent the ignorance and barbarism which could lead to a new war.”

The U.S. House of Representatives originally established the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1938 to investigate “the extent, character and objects of un-American propaganda activities in the United States.” Within two years, the committee closed many of Roosevelt’s New Deal projects and waged vehement attacks against other liberal organizations before focusing on Hollywood’s trade unions and anti-fascist groups. However, repudiation from the Hollywood left and the country’s new alliance with the Soviet Union diminished the Committee’s power during World War II.

In January 1945, a move by Representative John Rankin stopped the hemorrhaging of the committee’s reputation by proposing an amendment authorizing a permanent standing committee, which was approved with the votes of 137 Republicans and 70 Democrats. The nine-member committee was comprised of six Democrats and three Republicans, including California’s newly elected representative, Richard M. Nixon.



Auspicious Beginnings: Richard Nixon, on the HUAC team.

Eisler—“the Karl Marx of Communism in the musical field”—was subjected to two separate HUAC interrogations in 1947. On May 11, the day before his first interrogation, Hearst’s *Journal American* quoted a “former Communist” who claimed that Eisler was “more than just a member of the Communist Party—he was one of the real top policy makers in the field of music, movies, and the arts.” “Hanns,” the informer said, “would outline plans to be followed in Hollywood to recruit movie stars, to place Communist propaganda in screen scripts, and in general was the commissar of the West Coast Party activities on the movie front.” But the committee did not get the responses from Eisler they desired at the first private hearing in Los Angeles, so a new hearing was scheduled for September in Washington.

In “Cry for Shame,” her blistering essay in *The New Republic*, war correspondent Martha Gellhorn described Eisler’s second hearing as “quite a show, and free too: the Un-Americans putting on a flawless travesty of justice.” Eisler was not allowed to cross-examine witnesses or read a statement (though it was later printed in *New Masses* as “Fantasia in G-Men”).

When chief investigator Robert Stripling posed the dreaded question—“Mr. Eisler, are you now, or have you ever been, a Communist?”—“the four Un-Americans...woke up, moved, leaned forward,” wrote Gellhorn. “For now we had the clue, the thing the plot hung on, the horrid syllables that gave everyone his fame and position and power and his swelling sense of virtue. We had, in short, the delicious smell of blood.”

Eisler replied that in 1926 he had “made application” to the Communist Party in Germany, but had never followed up on the application or participated in any Communist Party activities. “I found out very quick that I couldn’t combine my artistic

activities with the demand of any political party,” he explained, “so I dropped out.” The committee further pointed to Eisler’s inclusion as a communist in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* of 1933 and clippings from *The Daily Worker* in the 1930s—long before he was living in the U.S.—as evidence of his current affiliation. They also questioned him on his role as chairman of the International Music Bureau, an organization formed in Moscow for the purpose of “spreading revolutionary consciousness among composers and professional musicians.” The organization, however, was “apparently a dream on paper,” wrote Gellhorn, “which got its letterhead (and never went farther) in Moscow when Eisler was not there to consent or advise.”

Eisler’s original FBI file contained examples of music scores not available for viewing online, but it is evident that much of HUAC’s and the FBI’s musical focus concerned the *kampflieder* (“songs for the struggle”) that Eisler wrote in the 1920s for agitprop troupes, workers’ theaters, and proletarian choirs, and not his Hollywood film music. One of the most famous *kampflieder*, “Solidarity Song,” became an instant hit after it was introduced in the 1932 German film *Kuhle Wampe*. The movie was promptly banned by the Prussian government, but the song was popularized in demonstrations and cabarets.



Defending Your Life: Eisler (center) at the HUAC hearing.

The committee questioned Eisler on the content of many of his workers’ songs, but one song in particular caused much heated debate—“Abortion Is Illegal.” Rankin called it “filth.” Eisler objected to the word and reminded the committee that the lyrics came from poetry, not him.

“Mr. Eisler, haven’t you on a number of occasions said, in effect, that music is one of the

most powerful weapons for the bringing about of the revolution?” asked Stripling. “I think in music I can enlighten and help people in distress in their fight for their rights,” Eisler replied. “In Germany we didn’t do so well...The truth is, songs cannot destroy Fascism, but they are necessary...It’s a matter of musical taste whether you like them...If you don’t like them, I am sorry; you can listen to ‘Open the Door, Richard.’”

“If the Un-Americans were realists, instead of a hunting pack,” wrote Gellhorn, “they would recognize that to be a ‘real member’ of the Communist Party, you have to earn your *C* by Communist standards, which no one has ever denied are both long and tough and highly unsuited to men who are chiefly interested in sonatas, cantatas and the theory of counterpoint.” But Eisler had no illusions about his chances: “The struggle is one-sided. I feel like a native who is trying to defend himself against an atom bomb with a bow and arrow.”

*“American democracy is wonderful if it works.
In my case it didn’t work.”*

After the second interrogation, the case was referred to the Justice Department, which shelved it. The FBI’s own wiretaps of Eisler’s telephone in Malibu had not revealed a single conversation that could be described as “Communist,” and the deportation proceedings against the composer were running out of steam. Neither the INS nor HUAC had been successful in proving that Eisler actually had been a member of the Communist Party of Germany—the only legal basis for revoking his status as an immigrant. Since there wasn’t enough evidence for a punishable offense and an acquittal would cause a “loss of face,” a compromise was reached: “technical extradition,” a “voluntary” exit visa to any country properly issuing a passport, with the exception of the border countries of Canada and Mexico.

Eisler’s friends and colleagues rallied in support. Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein and Roger Sessions formed a defense committee. The Composers Guild of Great Britain wrote a strongly worded letter to the U.S. Ambassador in London comparing the interrogations to the Nazi civil trials. At the instigation of Charlie Chaplin, Pablo Picasso put together a committee of French artists whose public letter to the U.S. embassy in Paris was published in *Les lettres françaises*. Signed by Picasso, Henri Matisse, Jean Cocteau, Georges Auric, and many others, the letter stated that Eisler’s extradition to the “American zone” in Germany would mean he would be incarcerated as a Nazi together with other Nazis.

On December 14, a Hanns Eisler solidarity concert was held in Los Angeles with Igor Stravinsky and Ernst Toch in attendance. The next day, 14 artists and scientists—including Copland, Bernstein, Sessions, Toch, Thomas Mann, Albert Einstein, Dmitri Mitropoulos, George Antheil and Pierre Monteux—presented U.S. Attorney General

Tom Clark with a petition demanding that the extradition order against Eisler be canceled.

Thanks to these protests, Eisler's lawyers were finally able to arrange a hearing with the INS on February 6, 1948. But without the resources to fight the legal system, Eisler had no choice but to agree to the "technical extradition" solution. It was all over in 30 minutes.

Three weeks later, the defense committee staged a farewell concert in New York's Town Hall. The program included the premiere of Eisler's twelve-tone piece, *Fourteen Ways of Describing Rain*, based on his score to Ivens' 1929 silent film, *Rain*, that had been dedicated to Arnold Schoenberg and first performed at his 70th birthday in 1944. The *Septet No. 2* was based on an uncompleted score Eisler had been writing for an upcoming re-release of Chaplin's *The Circus*. In his review of the concert, composer and critic Virgil Thomson wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune*, "We hope that [Eisler's] case will be reconsidered and he will be permitted to return."

On that final, chilly March morning at LaGuardia, Eisler read one final statement to the press: "I leave this country not without bitterness and infuriation. I could well understand it when in 1933 the Hitler bandits put a price on my head and drove me out. They were the evil of the period; I was proud of being driven out. But I feel heartbroken over being driven out of this beautiful country in this ridiculous way...Now I am forced to leave. But I take with me the image of the real American people whom I love."



HUAC Wins: Hanns (left) and his wife board a plane to exile.

After saying good-bye to Gerhart and wife, Hilde, Eisler and wife, Louise, boarded a

flight bound for Prague. The INS issued a notice to border posts to prevent the composer's return, and Eisler officially became a political and artistic "unperson" in the U.S.

In 1949, the Eislers settled in East Berlin, the capital of the new German Democratic Republic (GDR), and Eisler quickly wrote the country's national anthem—"Auferstanden aus Ruinen" ("Risen From the Ruins," text by Johannes Becher). Eisler continued to write political, if more moderate, music to the end of his life. Hanns Eisler died on September 6, 1962.

*"A composer knows that music is written by human beings
for human beings and that music is a continuation of life,
not something separated from it."*

Virgil Thomson expressed the hope of many in the musical community when he wrote of the hope that Eisler's works "will reach us regularly from Europe." But that was not meant to be. Eisler's ignominious departure kept his music from being performed in the U.S. until 1970.

Toward the end of the 20th century, Eisler's songs, which had always "straddled the domains of both popular and high art," found a new audience. Numerous CDs explore Eisler's songs, whether written for Brecht plays, factory works or the concert hall. British folk star Billy Bragg set Woody Guthrie's 1948 ballad, "Eisler on the Go," to music in 1998. And Sting recorded the melody for Eisler's "To My Little Radio" with new lyrics, "The Secret Marriage," for his 1987 album *Nothing Like the Sun*. A 1997 documentary, *Solidarity Song: The Hanns Eisler Story*, brought Eisler's life to a new generation who had never heard of him.

In 1998, on the centennial of his birth, Eisler's bust, dismantled after the disintegration of the GDR in 1990, was restored to the entrance of the Berlin music conservatory that continues to bear his name.

*"I hope the American people will soon place these men
where they belong—on the garbage heap of history."*

Richard Nixon said the Eisler case was “perhaps the most important to have come before this committee.” If it is not as famous as many of the other Hollywood hearings, it did set a dangerous precedent of fear, silence and ruin that continued throughout the 1950s. After the downfall of Joseph McCarthy in the late '50s, HUAC lost prestige but remained a standing committee until 1975.

The hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities remain a black mark on American political and cultural history with wounds that fester to this day. From the sidelines of Eisler’s “show,” in words that still seem all-too frighteningly relevant, Martha Gellhorn wrote, “If you can ruin a musician’s livelihood, before a court has determined whether he is indeed a law-breaker or not, pretty soon you can ruin a painter and a teacher and a writer and a lawyer and an actor and a scientist; and presently you have made a silent place. If these things should come to pass, America is going to look very strange to Americans and they will not be at home here, for the air will slowly become unbreathable to all forms of life except sheep.”

Baaaah...

—FSMO