

Humour and the Representation of Fascism in *Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg*: Adorno *contra* Brecht and Hanns Eisler

Bertolt Brecht and Hanns Eisler's *Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg* occupies a key but under-recognized place in debates about humour in anti-fascist art in the late 1950s and early 1960s – debates largely dominated by Theodor W. Adorno's critique of Brecht's satirical plays on the Third Reich. In this article Anna Papaeti examines the artistic strategies and reception history of *Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg* in the context of such debates. Focusing in particular on Eisler's musical additions for the parodic 'higher regions' interludes, as well as on the controversies sparked by the 1959 West German premiere, she analyzes the play's role in stimulating key debates, showing how Brecht's play and Eisler's music attain a more complex and defensible position of resistance to fascism than was allowed in Adorno's critique. Anna Papaeti has a doctorate from King's College London, has worked at the Royal Opera House, London, and as Associate Dramaturg at the Greek National Opera, Athens. Her postdoctoral research includes a DAAD fellowship on Hanns Eisler (Universität der Künste, Berlin, 2010) and a Marie Curie Intra-European Fellowship (University of Göttingen, 2011–14) on the use of music by the Greek military junta. She has previously published in such journals as *Opera Quarterly*, *Music and Politics*, and *The World of Music*, and in edited scholarly volumes.

Key terms: anti-fascist humour, Harry Buckwitz, Berliner Ensemble, Hanns Ernst Jäger.

THE USE of humour and parody in anti-fascist art has proved to be a source of persistent controversy and debate. The rejection of humour in this context is largely still dominated by Theodor W. Adorno's notorious 1962 critique of Bertolt Brecht. However, this critique is problematic and needs to be revisited. Brecht and Hanns Eisler's play *Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg* was at the centre of these debates. Even though its key role has not been recognized, the work sheds special light on the positions under contention as well as the aesthetic and political stakes involved. A close look at the artistic strategies and reception history of this work will also illuminate the problems with blanket rejections of humour.

In this article I show that humour and parody were key to Brecht and Eisler's strategy of resistance to neo-fascism, which they saw as an imminent threat in the postwar period. The article will trace the development of the play through its various stages,

including Eisler's crucial later musical additions in 1959 and 1961, and reconstruct the role of *Schweyk* in stimulating key debates about the problems and possibilities of humour in anti-fascist art. The short and parodic interludes of the 'higher regions' and the controversies they sparked following the play's 1959 West German premiere will be considered in detail. To this day, these interludes exemplify the problematic yet powerful nature of political parody. Critically reading Adorno's case against Brecht's use of parody, the article concludes that Brecht's play and Eisler's music attain a more complex and defensible position with respect to resistance to fascism than Adorno allows.

From the Habsburgs to the Nazis

Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg is based on Jaroslav Hašek's 1923 unfinished novel *The Fateful Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk*, whose protagonist became the German Left's

favourite example of passive resistance to repressive power. A Czech writer and anarchist, Hašek (1883–1923) intended *Švejk* to be a four-volume novel, but his sudden death left it unfinished.

Hašek's *Švejk* consists of a number of comic episodes during which Švejk, a Czech dog-dealer, uses his wit to survive a series of adventures during the First World War. His inventiveness and the irony of his words and actions make him an anti-hero. By pretending to be an idiot, he manages to survive numerous tricky situations, unmasking the ugliness and futility of war as well as the corruption and incompetence of authority. In this sense, *Švejk* has become emblematic of passive resistance: that is, resistance through wily non-cooperation, rather than participation in direct, organized struggles. One way or another, the passive resister fails to do what the occupier tells him/her to do.

Projecting Hašek's anti-hero forward in time to the Nazi occupation of Prague, Brecht and Eisler's *Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg* employs many comic elements and characters, as well as parodies of Hitler, his generals and the SS. Consisting of a prologue, eight scenes, and an epilogue, it portrays the common people of Prague in their everyday attempts to survive the Nazi occupation. Its episodes are centred on the Chalice pub, in a Prague swarming with SS men, Gestapo spies, informers, and collaborators.

The half-wit Schweyk, the hungry photographer Baloun, and the pub's landlady Mrs Kopecka are not in the armed resistance. However, these episodes bring out their shared hardships, their aversion to the Nazi regime, and their solidarity and patriotism. Short interludes remove us to the 'higher regions', where Hitler talks with his generals. The play ends with the deadly march to Stalingrad and the defeat of the German army, whose disillusionment is expressed in the 'Deutsche Miserere', and with the historic confrontation between Schweyk and Hitler, lost on their way to Stalingrad, wandering in the bitter snow.

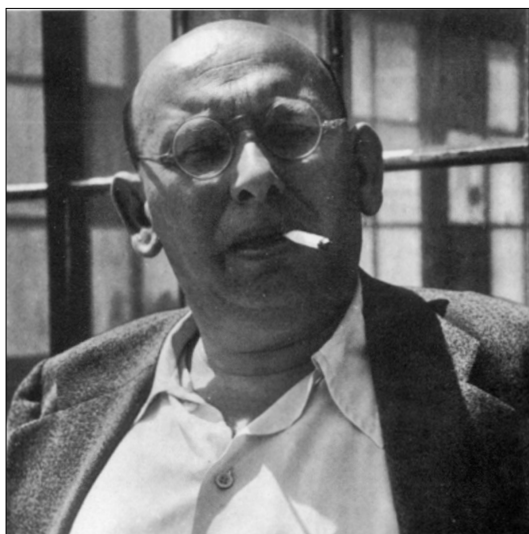
Behind Brecht and Eisler's play lies a complicated prehistory, as eminent figures of German theatre in exile sought to construct

an effective anti-fascist art work around this appealing character. Hašek's novel was first staged by Erwin Piscator in January 1928 in Berlin as *Die Abenteuer des braven Soldaten Schwejk*. When the Second World War broke out, Piscator wished to turn it into an anti-war film. In 1937 Brecht, who had been a member of the play's dramaturgical collective, wished to be involved in the project.¹ Although the film never came to be, Piscator did not give up. In the early 1940s he began thinking of a revised version for a New York theatre, counting on Brecht's contribution.

By July 1942, however, Brecht had begun contemplating his own version of *Schweyk* (which he now spells with a 'y'), first intended as a collaboration between Kurt Weill and *Threepenny Opera* impresario Ernst-Josef Aufricht.² Both Brecht and Aufricht aimed at a Broadway production, and therefore saw the collaboration with Weill as crucial. In trying to secure this, Brecht provided a central female character for Lotte Lenya: Mrs Kopecka, the proprietor of the Chalice pub. Soon, however, this collaboration fell apart. Weill's unhappiness with the English translation is well documented. However, the most important reason for his withdrawal was the possibility of a lawsuit by Piscator. Unaware of Brecht's project, Piscator also planned a Broadway production with Alfred Kreyborg, which was announced on 22 June 1943 by the *New York Times*. After the rejection from Weill, Brecht asked Hanns Eisler to compose the music.

Despite Brecht's hopes for a New York performance, in the end neither Brecht nor Piscator was able to stage the piece in the USA. In fact, the work did not receive its premiere until 1957 in Warsaw. According to Herbert Kunst, Brecht himself prevented the play from being performed immediately after the war, when requested by German theatres in 1946; at that time, he stated that the work was unfinished.³ He returned to the play, Kunst notes, during the last year of his life.

This account, however, has been recently contradicted by the singer Gisela May, who played Mrs Kopecka at the 1962 East-German premiere of the Berliner Ensemble, and went on to perform the role for the next



Above left: Hanns Eisler, composer of the score for *Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg*. Above right: Hanns Ernst Jäger in the title-role of the TV film of *Schweyk* (1961, directed by Rainer Wolffhardt).

twenty years. May reports that when Brecht returned to Germany he tried to get *Schweyk* performed in Leipzig – much earlier than 1956 – sending his play (which was not yet in print) to her father, the chief dramaturg there.⁴ May's father suggested to Brecht that, even though the first part was very good, the second still needed some work. In response, May recalls, Brecht demanded the manuscript's immediate return. Brecht's decision to complete and stage *Schweyk* as early as 1949 is important here in the light of post-war debates regarding the representation of traumatic and genocidal history in general, and of *Schweyk's* parodic interludes of the 'higher regions' in particular; this decision is discussed below.

Staging *Schweyk*

Since its world premiere in Warsaw in 1957, Brecht and Eisler's *Schweyk* has been criticized as a flawed play. In addition to the general discomfort over Brecht's transposition of Hašek's plot to the Second World War, the use of humour and political parody, in particular, have exercised critics. An article on 30 March 1957 in *Der Spiegel*, titled 'Braver Schweyk', remarked the discomfort expressed by Polish critics: Jan Kott described the change of historic context as 'an artistic

mistake'; Andre Wirth noted that fascism crushed and defeated the personal freedom displayed by *Schweyk*, while the *Zycie Warszawy* (*Warsaw Life*) categorically remarked that 'Hitler's Germany was not an operetta state'.⁵

Similar criticism was voiced on the occasion of *Schweyk's* West German premiere in Frankfurt am Main on 22 May 1959. Directed by Harry Buckwitz, it featured sets and costumes by Teo Otto. Hanns Ernst Jäger played the title-role. Its box-office success was noticed by the international press: 'Frankfurt Hails Satire on Nazis,' the *New York Times* reports only two days after the premiere.⁶ The 'higher regions' interludes became central to debates over parody and artistic representations of fascist terror. These were inspired by a caricature drawn by illustrator Arthur Szyk. Published in *Collier's* magazine on 17 January 1942, it shows Hitler and his generals in front of a globe, under the heading 'Don't believe a word of it'.

Intended by Brecht as horror fairy tales, these interludes satirically imitate Hitler and his generals, causing the uneasiness of critics. Brecht's interludes in the higher regions, all of which include Hitler, are profoundly ironic and occur three times in the play – in the opening Prologue, and before Scenes Four and Seven.

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Wie, mein lieber Chef der Polizei und SS
Steht eigentlich der kleine Mann zu mir?
Ich meine nicht nur hier
Sondern auch der in Österreich und der
Tschechei

(Oder wie diese Länder geheißen haben, es
ist einerlei)
Ist er für mich oder – liebt er mich?

[Tell me, since you're the head of my police and
SS / How would you say the little man views
me? / Not just the Germans only / But those in
Austria, Czecho-what's-its-name / (What the hell
are those small countries called, on my map they
all look the same) / Do they support me and – love
me indeed?]⁷

The second and third interludes, which are much shorter, show Hitler discussing with Goering and von Bock respectively the need for more tanks, weaponry, and the 'cheerful' labour of the 'European little man'. Hitler appears one last time in the Epilogue. There he has fallen from the 'higher regions' and is finally confronted with the little man he had been so eager to understand. The Epilogue, which is longer than all of the earlier interludes, stages the encounter between Hitler and Schweyk, lost on their way to Stalingrad.

In Buckwitz's 1959 staging of the 'higher regions', Hitler, Himmler, Goering, Goebbels and von Bock appear in waxed masks, standing around a globe before a huge swastika (see photo opposite). Suspended in an elevated space linked to the stage by a carpeted staircase, the Nazi high officials are clearly separated from the lives of the main characters. The globe – referring to Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* as well as staging Szyk's caricature – fills with blood each time Hitler puts his hand on it (according to Brecht's stage direction). Whereas for Brecht these interludes were written in the style of 'a horror fairy tale', Buckwitz saw them as a 'bloody panopticon' of power.⁸

Years before Adorno's criticism of Brecht's parodic treatment of the Nazis, these interludes triggered controversy at a public discussion that followed *Schweyk's* Frankfurt premiere. To the surprise of the organizers, who did not anticipate such attendance for the event, some 1,200 people turned up to hear a panel discuss and debate the play. The hall filled to capacity, and at the last minute additional arrangements had to be made.⁹ The impressive attendance is indicative not only of the depth of interest in subjects dealing with the war, but also of Brecht's popu-

larity at a time when, due to escalating Cold War tensions, his plays were increasingly absent from the West-German repertory.¹⁰

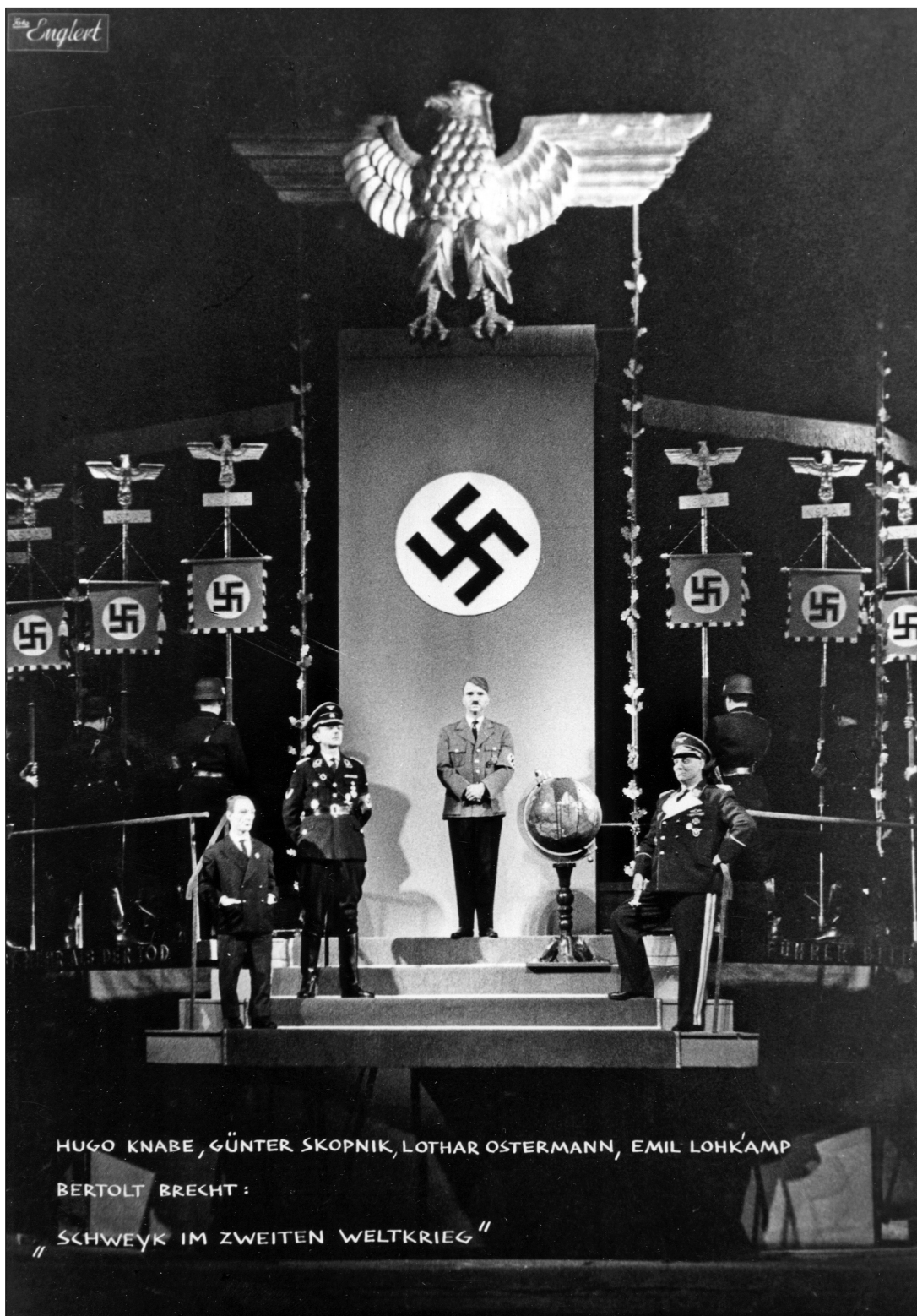
The panel in Frankfurt included speakers from both East (GDR) and West Germany (FRG). Representing the East were Helene Weigel, Hanns Eisler, Erich Engel, Manfred Wekwerth, and Elisabeth Hauptmann, among others. The West German panellists were Harry Buckwitz, the dramaturg Günther Skopnik, Siegfried Unseld from Suhrkamp Verlag, Joachim Kaiser from *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and the writer Erich Franzen from Munich.

The main question put to the panel and the audience was: 'Had Brecht gone too far – had he made the Nazis too entertaining?' Some panellists were sure that he had. Kaiser argued that Brecht's 'anti-fascist musical' trivialized the Nazi regime: 'If the SS becomes an object of laughter, then it is no longer the SS.'¹¹ Kaiser contended that Schweyk, the indestructible little man who fearlessly interacts with agents of power, bears little resemblance to the common people who trembled before the Nazis. The tension of the ensuing discussion is legible in Helene Weigel's response to Kaiser: 'If you mean that one cannot laugh about murder, then we cannot continue the discussion here.'¹²

In defence of *Schweyk*, director Erich Engel cited Brecht's words that laughter is 'the best way to overcome fear and to dispel misery'.¹³ On his part, Eisler defended the use of parody. The point, he argued, was not to give an accurate portrayal of the Third Reich but to provide a typology of widespread 'passive resistance'. The jokes, he said, are not harmless, given their nightmarish background. Insofar as they reveal and degrade the enemy, they are not trivializing: 'This play is not harmless for Germany, it is very tragic.'¹⁴

Humour and Parody: Adorno contra Brecht

Eisler's defence of the use of humour and parody in *Schweyk* during the 1959 discussion in Frankfurt is at odds with the dominant position emerging from these post-war



Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg, the Harry Buckwitz production, Frankfurt am Main, 1959. © Günter Englert. Musikarchiv, Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Used by permission.

debates – a position prefigured in Adorno's controversial 1951 dictum 'After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric.'¹⁵ As a social catastrophe that also demonstrates art's failure to prevent it, Auschwitz radically compromises traditional forms of artistic representation and expression.

In elaborating this challenge to art's very 'right to exist', Adorno criticizes Brecht's parodic treatment of the Nazis in two essays: 'Commitment' (1962) and 'Is Art Lighthearted?' (1967). Here I concentrate on the latter, in which Adorno qualifies his position on the impact of Auschwitz on art, while also responding to *Schweyk*. For Adorno, the structure of artistic semblance or illusion (*Schein*) ensures that all works of art will share an irreducible element of lightness or cheerfulness (*Heiterkeit*).¹⁶ At first allied with the promise of happiness, this lightness changes character under the pressure of history.

In the tense dialectic between lightness and seriousness, he argues that this promise survives even in artistic expressions of despair: 'The fact that through its very existence it stands outside the dominant [*sic*] spell that prevails allies it to a promise of happiness, a promise it itself somehow expresses in its expression of despair.'¹⁷ After Auschwitz, art is bound to resist lightheartedness rather than naively indulge it. The social catastrophe can only be represented negatively and indirectly, he concludes, offering Samuel Beckett as a model of negative presentation.

Adorno lived in Frankfurt at the time of *Schweyk*'s West German premiere, and was aware of the work and the debate that took place eight years before he wrote 'Is Art Lighthearted?'. He criticizes Brecht's humorous treatment of Hitler, arguing that this trivializes Nazi power and violence.¹⁸ For Adorno, polemical parodies of this kind are questionable because they falsify history and risk incomprehension:

Several years ago there was a debate about whether fascism could be presented in comic or parodistic form without that constituting an outrage against its victims. . . . Times were still good when Hašek wrote *Schweyk* [*sic*], with nooks and crannies and sloppiness right in the middle of the system of horror. But comedies about fascism

become accomplices of the silly mode of thinking that considered fascism beaten in advance because the strongest battalions in world history were against it.¹⁹

It is unlikely that, as Adorno rightly implies, Hašek's *Schweyk* would have survived long under the Nazis, something that Eisler and Brecht also acknowledge.²⁰ For both Brecht and Adorno, literature's emancipatory potential is crucial for the emergence of autonomous subjectivity. Adorno located the social conditions of fascism in two tendencies of late capitalism – 'integration' and 'administration'. Both tendencies, in his view, continued to characterize the post-war period. In its absolute form, integration becomes genocidal, and this for Adorno was demonstrated in Auschwitz.²¹

If art is to confront this traumatic demonstration and attempt to express the terror of genocide, Adorno contended, then it must resist the element of aesthetic enjoyment. After Auschwitz, this element of pleasure not only adds insult to the injury of the victims, but, 'objectively, it degenerates into cynicism, no matter how much it depends on kindness and understanding'.²² Adorno elaborates this point in *Negative Dialectics*, emphasizing that Auschwitz forces art to confront its own failure to have prevented or effectively resisted it.

This problem of complicity, or art's share in 'social guilt', calls radically into question art's very right to exist and compels artists to develop 'negative' and critically self-reflective means of representation.²³ Hence Adorno's preference for Beckett's modernism, with its negative way of processing the social catastrophe. Transformed by actual history, art's cheerfulness is not only trivializing, it contributes to the ongoing social catastrophe by encouraging submission and conformity rather than fostering critical subjectivity.

In Defence of Brecht

Adorno's criticism has had such resonance that to this day its arguments are reproduced. John Willett and Ralph Manheim's introduction to the English translation of the

play echoes Adorno, calling Brecht's decision to keep these interludes in as 'an error of judgement and of political sensitivity', as 'escapist, a witless insult to war's victims', and damaging to those who had no experience with the regime.²⁴

Although Adorno's criticism certainly holds true for works of the 'culture industry', it becomes problematic when mounted against Brecht and Eisler, whose collaborations aimed at critical reflection and action. While sharing Adorno's worries about the social catastrophe's paralyzing effects on art, Brecht developed a divergent artistic strategy. As he put it in a letter of 1946, his 'dialectical realism' aimed to transform the audience 'into social experimenters', while 'the critique of the reality shown should be tapped as a main source of artistic enjoyment'.²⁵

Such a strategy is always realized as an intervention into a specific context and thus cannot be separated from the actual struggles with which it engages. Adorno's critique, however, fails to recognize *Schweyk* as an intervention, disdaining to treat fully and seriously its text and music and ignoring the details of its context.

As the theorist Gene Ray points out in a critical reading of Adorno's attack on Brecht in 'Commitment', Adorno's case is ultimately undone by his consistent avoidance of context. Adorno criticizes 'works written for a real and shifting context of struggle', but elides the concrete situations to which Brecht's works responded. In this sense, examining the context and the effects of the art work are vital in understanding and evaluating it as an intervention. Even according to Adorno's own dialectical methodology, the avoidance of contextual specificity is a serious failing.²⁶

Neither Brecht nor Eisler was under any illusions that passive resistance alone could overthrow oppressive regimes. Nevertheless, their humorous fable of passive resistance aimed precisely to depict the people who were not organized in the armed resistance, and tried to show that their 'passivity' was by no means complicity. A possible motivation behind Brecht's persistent attempts to stage *Schweyk* was his increasing preoccu-

pation from 1943 onwards with the way the West perceived the Germans – that is, as Nazis and collaborators.

In August 1943, around the time Brecht was working on *Schweyk*, he and other German immigrants prepared a statement that included the need to 'distinguish clearly between the Hitler regime and the classes linked to it on the one hand and the German people on the other'.²⁷ Telling is his letter to Thomas Mann, in response to the latter's doubts about such a difference. Brecht points out to Mann the sheer size of German resistance, underlining the émigrés' 'heavy responsibility towards those fighters'.²⁸ He expressed a similar preoccupation in the *Kriegsfibel* (*War Primer*), the collection of caption-like poems Brecht wrote in exile to accompany images he clipped from newspapers between 1938 and 1945:

Ich hör die Herren in Downing Street euch schelten
Weil ihr's gelitten, trüget ihr die Schuld.
Wie dem nun sei: die Herren schelten selten
Der Völker unerklärliche Geduld.

[I hear the men of Downing Street accuse you /
Saying you stuck it out, so it's your fault. / They
may be right, but when did they last choose to /
Chide people's strange reluctance to revolt?]²⁹

In a 1946 letter to Eric Bentley, Brecht insisted on the transformative potential of plays written in times of revolution and world war: 'In periods when social orders are disintegrating literature does not necessarily disintegrate. Some literature is one of the factors of disintegration.'³⁰

Sharing Adorno's sense of artistic impasse, Brecht wrote in the same letter about the difficulty of working in 'the mixed smell of corpses and prosperity'. He expresses his concern that fascism was not entirely defeated, but threatened to return in new forms. For Brecht, the process of cultural mourning after 1945 is inseparable from the renewed struggle against neo-fascism. In his dialectical theatre, humour is just one of numerous means by which the world is represented to the audience for critical reflection.

Brecht later elaborated his ideas on dialectical theatre in *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1948).³¹ Estrangement or *Verfremdung*

– Brecht’s techniques of interruption and blocking – aimed at opening critical discursive spaces. Among these techniques, which include a separation of elements as opposed to Richard Wagner’s fused spectacle, Brecht also counts abrupt changes from serious to comic, aiming to thwart the illusion that society is natural and unchangeable:

Estrangement effects have long been known in the theatre and in other arts. The fact is that we always get an estrangement effect when art does not sustain the illusion that the viewer is face to face with nature itself. In theatre, for instance, the objective world is estranged by the invention of versification or by a highly personal style or by abrupt shifts between verse and prose or between the serious and the comic. I myself make use of estrangement effects (including the old ones mentioned above) to show that the nature of human society is not all that natural.³²

This technique is widely employed in *Schweyk*, where the protagonist is a constant source of humour. The conversation between Schweyk and Bretschneider, an SS agent, with regard to the failed attempt on Hitler’s life is indicative of this constant shift. Indeed, Schweyk’s encounters with power generate laughter.

SCHWEYK Wahrscheinlich eine billige. Heut stellens alles in der Massenproduktion her, und dann wundern sie sich, wenn es keine Qualität is. Warum, so ein Artikel is nicht mit der Liebe gemacht, wie früher eine Handarbeit, hab ich recht? Aber daß sie für eine solche Gelegenheit keine bessere Bomb wählen, is eine Nachlässigkeit von ihrer Seit. In Cesky Krumlov hat ein Schlachter einmal . . .

BRETSCHNEIDER Das nennen Sie eine Nachlässigkeit, wenn der Führer beinah seinen Tod findet?

[SCHWEYK Probably a cheap one. Everything’s mass-produced these days, and then people are surprised when they don’t get the quality stuff. Stands to reason something like that can’t be made with the same loving care like when they were hand-done, I mean doesn’t it? But I must say they were a bit careless not to pick a better bomb for a job like that. There used to be a butcher in Cesky Krumlov who . . .

BRETSCHNEIDER You call it careless when the Führer is nearly killed?]

Similar discussions take place with SS-Lieutenant Bullinger at the Gestapo in Scene

Two, making the scene far more complicated, given the audience’s knowledge of the terror of Nazi occupation and the implications of Schweyk’s talk. Such juxtaposition becomes even graver at the end of the play with the deadly march of the German troops to Stalingrad, making one shudder.

In fact, Schweyk’s humorously idiotic yet defiant language is rather explosive. Joachim Kaiser was right to point out, in the 1959 Frankfurt debates, that Schweyk is not the average little man. But this is not a weakness on Brecht’s part, since he is not aiming at a simple identification with the character. Schweyk’s renowned idiocy makes the state and its discourse appear ridiculous. Take, for example, his anti-communist slogans on the way to Stalingrad in Scene Eight: ‘Ich hab dort nix verlorn, ich komm zu Hilf und schitz die Zivilisation vorn Bolschewismus und ihr auch’ [‘I’m not looking for anything, I’m coming to help protect civilization against Bolshevism just like you’]. As Eisler points out, Schweyk’s mouthing of the state’s voice sounds ‘absurd’ and ‘idiotic’, ‘unmasking the enemy’.³³ In this way humour becomes social criticism.

Music as Critical Commentary

Eisler’s music for Brecht’s *Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg* both comments on and contributes to the action. It consists of a wide range of elements that together mirror and reinforce the different levels of discourse of Brecht’s play. Thought by Eisler to be the most important of his works for Brecht, he did not hesitate to call it ‘almost a small opera’ in the Brechtian sense.³⁴ The score was written partly in 1943 and completed in 1956. However, Eisler added orchestral intermezzi in 1959, and composed additional music for the ‘higher regions’ in 1961, turning *Schweyk* into one of his lengthiest stage scores. With regard to the music of the ‘higher regions’, Eisler decided to expand the 12-bar ‘higher regions’ *Vorspiel* into more extended musical sections, also setting the text to music.

The musical references of this ‘horror fairy tale’ are operatic and non-Brechtian. Eisler musically complements the Nazi parodies

with operatic parodies alluding to the musical influence of Wagner, Hitler's favourite composer. This connection is firmly made from the very first interlude, in which there is a quotation of the so-called Tristan motif (though in a different pitch) from Wagner's famous prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*.

This quotation is heard at the point when Himmler answers Hitler's agonized question about how he is seen in Europe by the Little Man. Following Hitler's abrupt, chromatic and high-pitched vocal line, a language filled with pathos and empty gestures, the silences of the Tristan motif stand out as

10

Langsamer

Pr.

Hitler

Himmler

cresc.

Langsamer

Mein

1. Solo

2. Solo

1. Solo

1.2.

K.

3.4.

5.6.

7.8.

Kb.

4. dr.

4. dr.

cresc.

a tempo con poco moto

Pr.

Hitler

Himmler

Füh- rer,

zum Teil be- tet er sie

1.2.

K.

3.4.

5.6.

7.8.

Kb.

pizz

mf

a tempo con poco moto

Ep. 15399/59 24. unig
III/1972 C. G. Loder, Leipzig

Hanns Eisler, *Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg*, first interlude in the 'higher regions'. Musikarchiv, Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Used by permission.

both parodic and critical. Himmler's three-note descending phrase 'Mein Führer' brings to mind Tristan's address to King Marke in the final scene of Act Two ('O König') after he and Isolde are caught.

Eisler plays here with the intervals: Tristan's descending minor third (B-G#) is inverted into Himmler's major sixth (B-D). Singing deformed opera, Eisler notes, 'the fascist leaders are exposed as bad Wagnerian singers', and their music is 'wickedly revealing'.³⁵ Juxtaposed with the simple, direct, and memorable songs that take up most of the work, the music of the 'higher regions' sounds disconnected, false, and is deeply ironic. This contrast, impossible to ignore, thus becomes critical commentary.

From Folk Song to Mass Song

The orchestral intermezzi constitute another layer of the music. They include folk dances, adding national colour. Eisler's use of dances such as the beseda and polka, along with folk melodies he had heard as a student in Prague and later as a soldier in Czechoslovakia, is not only indebted to his wish to paint the characters with national colours. During his years in exile, Eisler wrote repeatedly about the importance of folk music, dances, and the people's song. In his discussion on working-class music in 1935, Eisler focuses on the revolutionary potential of genuine folk music, whose importance he locates in the absence of the 'difference between entertainment and serious music':³⁶

There are two sorts of folk songs, the genuine and the false. The genuine folk song originated in earlier centuries from the people themselves. The false folk song is the product of a corrupt and sordid entertainment industry which 'borrows' the idiom of the genuine folk song, only in a coarser and distorted form. . . . On the other hand, the genuine folk song can be extremely valuable, both from a point of view of the text as well as of the music, and is genuine folk culture.³⁷

The idea of dance and music *of* and *for* the ordinary people is important for Eisler. These texts and music could still contribute, he insisted, to the quest for critical and revolutionary music. Central to the latter is the mass

song that comes to replace the folk song, as the forms of folk art decline in capitalist societies. The international character of the mass song reinforces its function in social struggles, adding a new dimension to people's song: 'The mass song is a fighting song of the modern working class and is, to a certain degree, folk song at a higher stage than before, because it is international.'³⁸

Eisler's ideas are exemplified in the Moldau Song, for which he uses part of the melody from Smetana's *Vltava* (1874) from the symphonic cycle *Má vlast* (*My Fatherland*). Inspired by the river that runs through Prague, *Vltava*, along with the rest of the cycle, represents an apotheosis of Czech nationalist ideals and the notion of fatherland. Eisler had used motifs from *Vltava* before, namely in his score for the film *Hangmen Also Die* (1943), which deals with the active resistance in Prague during the Nazi occupation. The association of Smetana's *Má vlast* with Czech identity and nationalism is clear. The Nazis also understood this. They eventually banned the cycle after enthusiastic responses during performances – as for example, that in Prague on 11 May 1939.³⁹ Eisler's use here highlights the spirit of the Czechs, on which the play draws continuously, not least through expressions such as 'true Czechs' ('richtige Tschechen').

However, Eisler's use of the *Vltava* motif is also an attempt to write a modern folk song, a mass song. Smetana's emblematic melody, which came to represent Czech identity, is in itself a kind of folk song, dating back to the Italian Renaissance.⁴⁰ From Smetana to Brecht and Eisler, the song continued on its path as a 'folk song', becoming the inspiration for Bob Dylan's socially and politically charged song (and album) 'The Times They are a-Changin''. According to Vera Stegmann, Dylan had heard the song during the show *Brecht on Brecht*, which left a lasting influence on him: 'It is only a small step from Brecht's "Es wechseln die Zeite", translated by George Tabori as 'times are a-changing', to 'Dylan's song and the album "The Times They Are a-Changin'".⁴¹ Speaking about his experience and the influence of the Brecht songs in his autobiographical

account, *Chronicles*, Dylan's language echoes Hanns Eisler: 'They were like folk songs in nature, but unlike folk songs, too, because they were sophisticated.'⁴²

Brecht's lyrics for the Moldau Song provided Eisler with the internationalist character he was looking for. Brecht's many arduous attempts to get the song right, attempts that gave him 'a glimmering of the agonies of the untalented', are well documented.⁴³ They denote the important role he ascribed to this song with regard to the play's message – and also structurally, since it is sung again at the very end of the work. The lines 'Das Große bleibt groß nicht und klein nicht das Kleine. Die Nacht hat zwölf Stunden, dann kommt schon der Tag' ['The great shall not stay great, the darkness is lifting. The night has twelve hours, but at last comes the day'] are both international and diachronic.

In this sense, the Moldau Song gives us an example of the mass song that comes from a blend of people's traditions, has clarity but also musical vigour and strong lyrics. It is different from the fighting songs of the early 1930s, characterized by the strong pulse of marches and their martial character. The terror of war did not leave the aesthetic of the fighting song unaffected. Here, Brecht's 1948 journal concerns Eisler's dislike of marching songs: '[Eisler] has now sublimated his antipathy to the vulgarity and primitiveness of the marching songs by absorbing the united front song symphonically, i.e. as a folk song in formally strict pieces.'⁴⁴

This is not to suggest that the marches were dropped altogether: they appear in Eisler's cantata *Bilder aus der Kriegsfibel* (1957), among other works. The use of the brass marching sounds and the chorus in Bild 9 (No. 39 in Brecht's *Kriegsfibel*), so reminiscent of Eisler's earlier music, pays homage to the resistance of the people of Moscow, workers and farmers, who repel the Nazis in the name of the people. Eisler here recalls the *Kampfmusik* of the 1920s and 1930s, so intrinsically linked with the revolutionary spirit of the Soviet people. This, however, is not the prevailing mood of the cantata, which sounds rather mournful, sombre yet dynamic, detached and passionate, playing (just like

Schweyk though in different ways) with the dialectic of mourning and resistance.

Cultural Mourning and Resistance

Schweyk and *Kriegsfibel* are linked in more ways than one, as they betray the attempt of both Brecht and Eisler to come to terms with the traumas of the war. As such, they are exemplary of their dialectic of cultural mourning and resistance, developed in their post-war works. In Scene Three of *Schweyk*, Baloun is clandestinely selling postcards of ruined German cities as if they were pornographic pictures. A customer reads the caption on a postcard of cratered Cologne: 'Hitler ist einer der größten Architekten aller Zeiten' ['Hitler is one of the greatest architects of all time']. This caustic combination of photo-image and textual caption embedded in the play directly echoes Brecht's strategy in the *Kriegsfibel*. And as the scene from *Schweyk* shows, this dialectical strategy of ironic commentary also enabled Brecht to critically register the aspect of obscenity that Adorno insisted on. The short, pithy epigrams he wrote to accompany images clipped from newspapers enabled Brecht to reflect on the deep traumas inflicted by fascism and the tragic dimensions of the war. Thus it is no accident that Eisler composed a cantata for soli, male chorus, and orchestra based on fifteen images of epigrams from the *Kriegsfibel* in 1957, one year after Brecht's death.

Brecht and Eisler developed their own kind of critical dialectic of mourning and resistance. Eisler's Moldau Song is exemplary of this dialectic: it is strong without being overpowering. Sung by the actors at the play's conclusion, it becomes the leitmotif of the work, enabling it to end on the upbeat of popular resistance and hope. That Eisler succeeded in creating a song against oppression that surpasses its temporal and national context is clear in Jürgen Schebera's account of a performance at the Berliner Ensemble in the autumn of 1968, a few months after the suppression of the Prague Spring. Schebera recalls how Gisela May had to interrupt her singing of the Moldau Song, due to the great applause after these

lines:⁴⁵ 'Es wechseln die Zeiten. Die riesigen Pläne der Mächtigen kommen am Ende zum Halt. Und gehn sie einher auch wie blutige Hähne. Es wechseln die Zeiten, da hilft kein Gewalt' ['For times have to change. All the boundless ambitions of those now in power will soon have been spent. Like bloodspattered cocks they defend their positions. But times have to change, which no force can prevent']. The applause returned at the end of the song, and standing ovations interrupted the performance for five minutes.

This incident is important because it highlights how Brecht and Eisler's *Schweyk* was understood beyond its Second World War context, as a fable of people's resistance against oppressive regimes. A similar understanding of the piece, this time however from the other side of divided Cold War Germany, is implied in a review of the 1959 Frankfurt production: 'A song of hope that has, of course, remained a song of hope for those who live by the Moldau.'⁴⁶

The disruptive applause of the East Berlin audience in autumn 1968 expressed both the thwarted expectations and hopes for a different kind of communism and an abiding solidarity after the suppression of the Prague Spring. In this way, Brecht and Eisler's decision to go ahead with the work after the war becomes meaningful and defensible. From the standpoint of social and political struggles, any work that manages to criticize state power and repression and to inspire resistance becomes a weapon of struggle.

A new production of *Schweyk* was staged at the Berliner Ensemble in 2009. Directed by Manfred Karge, the production problematically omitted the 'higher regions' scenes. The decision to leave them out seems to be a clear concession to Adorno's 'after-Auschwitz' criticism. According to Karge's dramaturg Hermann Wündrich, when Brecht wrote the piece, which was intended for an American audience, Auschwitz was not yet known.⁴⁷ The implication here is twofold. First, the 'crude' parodies of the 'higher regions' addressed people who had no knowledge of German politics – that is, American audiences. Second, had Brecht known of Auschwitz, he would not have written them.

A Tacit Answer to Adorno

Karge's 'correcting' omission was favourably received by the press. One review goes as far as to say that Karge should be thanked for getting rid of the grotesque imaginary interludes.⁴⁸ Such reasoning is dubious, to say the least. Although we may not know precisely how much Brecht knew about the Holocaust in the summer of 1943, he was certainly very aware of it shortly after. In any case, Brecht's decision to go ahead with the work with no revisions was certainly an informed one. It is directly linked to the continued struggle against neo-fascism which both he and Eisler saw as urgent.

Furthermore, Eisler's decision to compose extra music for these pieces in 1961 – well after his musical reflection on Auschwitz for Alain Resnais' documentary *Nuit et brouillard* (1955), but also after the controversial discussion on parody in Frankfurt – adds a further layer of aesthetic and political significance to these parodic interludes. Although these parts are uncomfortable and problematic, omitting them amounts to erasing the work's tensions, reinforced in both the text and the music. Staging the conflict would be a much more effective solution than erasing it.

Even with their debatable problems, the issues of image and the manipulation of public opinion staged in the 'higher regions' open directly on problems that remain acute for us today. Brecht's *Verfremdung* techniques and Eisler's musical irony would allow for retaining the 'higher regions' characters and music, clarifying their historical context while simultaneously pointing to their problematic nature. A more rigorously Brechtian staging would link the work to ongoing struggles and generate political force, inviting us as spectators to recover the position of 'social experimenters'. It is precisely at this point of 'staging the conflict' that Adorno and Brecht could meet.

To conclude, Brecht and Eisler's *Schweyk* is far from being discredited by Adorno's criticism of humour, despite the latter's sharp theoretical thrust. Failing to engage in detail with the play and its context, Adorno misses the work's direct links to struggle and

its potentials for resistance. Whatever the play's flaws may be, critics cannot ignore the fact that it aims to inspire hope and a more active resistance in its audiences. As Eisler puts it, the aesthetic standards of a work of art are not inflexible, but are determined by a work's revolutionary purpose.⁴⁹ Understood in this context, Brecht and Eisler's *Schweyk* constitutes a tacit answer to Adorno. Close engagement with this work demonstrates that the critical encounter between Adorno on the one hand and Brecht and Eisler on the other is not at all a settled affair. Today this encounter remains a productive one.

Notes

A German-language version of this text ('Den Widerstand komponieren: Bertolt Brechts und Hanns Eislers *Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg*') appeared in *Hanns Eisler: Angewandte Musik (Musik-Konzepte 12)*, ed. Ulrich Tadday (Munich: Edition text+ Kritik, 2012).

1. Bertolt Brecht, *Letters*, ed. John Willett, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 252–3.
2. Bertolt Brecht, *Journals 1934–1955*, ed. John Willett, trans. Hugh Morrison (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 248.
3. Herbert Kunst, 'Zur Entstehungsgeschichte', in *Materialien zu Bertolt Brechts 'Schweyk im zweiten Weltkrieg'*, ed. Herbert Knust (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 155–6.
4. Gisela May, 'Der Eine sang besser und der Andere eben nicht: Gisela May über Hanns Eisler im Theater', *Eisler-Mitteilungen*, No. 44 (November 2007), p. 19.
5. 'Brecht Premieren: braver Schweyk', *Der Spiegel* 27 March 1957 <www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-41120961.html>, accessed 20 August 2012.
6. 'Frankfurt Hails Satire on Nazis', *New York Times*, 24 May 1959, Harry-Buckwitz-Archiv (hereafter HBA) 64 Akademie der Künste, Berlin.
7. Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1967); *Schweyk in the Second World War and The Visions of Simone Machard*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim, trans. William Rowlinson, Hugh Rank, and Ellen Rank (New York: Arcade, 2000). All quotations from the play are taken from these editions.
8. "'Brechts Schweyk im Kreuzfeuer': Eine Diskussion im Frankfurter Volksbildungsheim", *Neue Presse*, (Frankfurt), 6 June 1959, HBA 1001. Translations of archival material are my own.
9. Ibid.
10. See 'Sol Brecht gespielt werden?', *Die Volksbühne Jahrgang*, Frankfurt/Main, VIII, 11 (July 1959), HBA 64, p. 169–70.
11. 'Keineswegs harmlos: Eine Brecht-Diskussion', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 June 1959, Hanns-Eisler-Archiv (hereafter HEA) 2742, Akademie der Künste.
12. 'Brechts Schweyk im Kreuzfeuer'.
13. 'Brechts "Schweyk" und das Publikum', *Deutsche Woche*, Munich, 17 June 1959, HBA 64.

14. Hanns Eisler, cited in 'Keineswegs harmlos'.
15. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society' [1951], in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), p. 17–34.
16. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Is Art Lighthearted?' [1967], *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 247–53; 'Ist die Kunst heiter?', *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 11, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt/Main, 1986), p. 599–606.
17. Ibid., p. 248.
18. Ibid., p. 252.
19. Ibid., p. 251–2. Here the English translator makes Adorno anachronistically adopt Brecht's spelling. In the German original, however, Adorno uses Hašek's *Schwejk*.
20. See Brecht, *Journals*, p. 278, 280; Hanns Eisler, *A Rebel in Music*, ed. Manfred Grabs, trans. Marjorie Meyer (Berlin: Seven Seas, 1978), p. 210.
21. 'Genocide is the Absolute Integration', in Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 362. For a discussion of Adorno's position on integration and administration, and their connection to modernity, see Gene Ray, 'History, Sublime, Terror: Notes on Culture's Failure and the Social Catastrophe', in *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, ed. Laura Grindstaff, John Hall, and Ming-Cheng Lo (London: Routledge, 2010); *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: from Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11 and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
22. Adorno, 'Is Art Lighthearted?', p. 251.
23. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 366–7.
24. John Willett and Ralph Manheim, Introduction to *Schweyk in the Second World War*, p. xx.
25. Brecht, *Letters*, p. 411.
26. Gene Ray, 'Dialectical Realism and Radical Commitments: Brecht and Adorno on Representing Capitalism', *Historical Materialism*, No. 18 (2010), p. 3–24. I would like to thank Gene Ray for many invigorating discussions on Brecht and Adorno, and for his response to a draft of this article.
27. Brecht, *Journals*, p. 288.
28. Brecht, *Letters*, p. 374.
29. Bertolt Brecht, *Kriegsfiel in Gesammelte Werke* Vol. 10 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), p. 1047; *War Primer*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Libris, 1998).
30. Brecht, *Letters*, p. 411.
31. Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 179–205.
32. Brecht, *Letters*, p. 543; translation modified, my emphasis.
33. Eisler, *Rebel in Music*, p. 208–9.
34. Ibid., p. 205.
35. Ibid., p. 205–6.
36. Ibid., p. 135.
37. Ibid., p. 98.
38. Ibid., p. 99.
39. Sally Bick, 'A Double Life in Hollywood: Hanns Eisler's Score for the Film *Hangmen Also Die* and the Covert Expressions of a Marxist Composer', *The Musical Quarterly*, XC, No. 1 (2010), p. 126.
40. The melody derives from Giuseppe Cenci's Renaissance canzonetto *Fuggi, fuggi, fuggi da quest cielo*. It is also known as *Aria di Mantova* by Biagio Marini and Marco Uccellini. Its melody has appeared in popular songs of several European countries, for example as the Czech folk song 'Ko ka leze dirou' ('The Cat Crawls

through the Hole'). See John Walter Hill, 'Giuseppe Cenci', *Grove Music* <www.oxfordmusiconline.com>; Christian Falvey, 'Smetana's "My Country": a Symphonic Poem to the Nation' <www.radio.cz/en/article/121632>, accessed 10 September 2012.

41. Vera Stegmann, 'Perspectives on Hanns Eisler', *The International Brecht Society Yearbook 33: Gestus Music*, ed. Friedemann J. Weidauer (University of Connecticut, 2008), p. 142.

42. Bob Dylan, *Chronicles*, Vol. I (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), p. 272.

43. Brecht, *Journals*, p. 296.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 413.

45. Jürgen Schebera, 'Eisler und die 68er: eine Umfrage', *Eisler-Mitteilungen*, 46 (October 2008), p. 23–4.

46. 'Schweyk im 2. Weltkrieg', *Nachtausgabe*, Frankfurt, 26 May 1959, HBA 64.

47. I would like to thank Hermann Wündrich for discussing the production with me.

48. Peter Hans Göpfert, 'Berliner Ensemble: "Schweyk im Zweiten Weltkrieg" von Bertolt Brecht und Hanns Eisler', *Kulturradio* <www.kulturradio.de/rezensionen/buehne/2008/Berliner_Ensemble_Schweyk_im_Zweiten_Weltkrieg_.html>, accessed 22 June 2011.

49. Hanns Eisler, 'Fortschritte in der Arbeitermusikbewegung', *Schriften I: Musik und Politik 1924–48* (Munich: Rogner and Bernhard, 1973), p. 114.

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