



Erich Zeisl: The Song Output

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When I first heard songs by Erich Zeisl – *Mondbilder* - in a recital of the renowned baritone Adrian Eroed in Vienna, I was completely taken by the intense musicality and creativity of the songs and could not believe I had never heard of this composer. The aim of this lecture is to introduce more and more people to the outstanding compositions of Erich Zeisl.

Biographical Information

Zeisl was born into a musical household in Vienna on May 18, 1905. Although surrounded by music at home, no one in the family considered music as a profession. He did receive early piano lessons and became an excellent pianist. Zeisl had a nervous temperament and was prone to depression all his life. His mother thought that his dedication to music intensified this condition. Fortunately, Richard Stoehr, teacher at the Vienna State Academy, discovered the talent of Zeisl and supported his musical studies. Zeisl studied at the Vienna State Academy on and off between 1919 and 1923. In addition, he studied with Joseph Marx and Hugo Kauder.

From the 1920s on, Zeisl established himself as a composer in Vienna. The genre Lied played an essential role in his life at that point. His songs were performed by famous singers of the time in important venues, like the Konzerthaus. He became a member in professional music associations and attempted to get a long-time publishing contract with Schott Verlag, which was denied. Gertrude Jellinek, whom he met in the mid 20's and who became Zeisl's wife later stated that this was probably due to the political climate already visible at this time.

The next years brought life changing events. In 1928 important performances were scheduled and Zeisl was invited to teach at the Vienna Conservatory. But on March 13, 1938, Hitler invaded Austria, and everything changed. To survive, the Zeisls had to leave Austria. Their escape led them to Paris, then to New York in 1939 and finally to Los Angeles. These events brought about a profound change in his musical style. The scholar Dr. Malcolm Cole calls this new style the "Hebraic Style". Starting in 1941 Zeisl worked for MGM, did freelance studio work and private teaching. He was part of a social circle with artists like Milhaud Schoenberg and Erich Wolfgang Korngold. In 1945 Zeisl became an American Citizen. At this time, he composed his probably most well-known piece, the *Requiem Ebraico*. He started to be successful as a composer again and taught at institutions like the Los Angeles City College. On February 18, 1959, Zeisl died of a heart attack.

Musical Style and Overview of Song Output

In general, Zeisl's musical style can be divided in three categories of style.

- Viennese period
- "Hebraic" style
- Movie music

All his songs belong into the Viennese period. Between 1920 and 1928 Zeisl wrote approximately 100 songs, several of which are published by Edition Strache, Doblinger Verlag and Universal Edition. By his peers he was considered as a moderately modern composer. Gertrude Jellinek later stated that he was not modern enough for some and too modern for others. The musical style of his songs ranges from late Romantic to songs without a key signature. His musical influences were songs heard at home, Slavic folk music and music of the synagogue. Zeisl studied scores of Schubert, Brahms, Wolf, Mahler, Strauss and he had a strong admiration for Wagner and Verdi.

For Zeisl, a song was a drama in a single page. He was not an avid reader, but friends provided him with interesting poetry. The choice of poets used for his songs ranges from Goethe to lesserknown poets and writings of his friends. Many songs carry autobiographical traits. The songs exhibit an outstanding gift for melodies, the use of word painting and major/minor vacillation. Furthermore, we find the use of pedal points and occasional bitonality. Most songs have a wide range and a challenging tessitura. The piano accompaniment plays a major role in all of Zeisl's songs, also due to the fact that he himself was a skilled pianist.

Introduction to two of Zeisl's songs

"Die fünf Hühnerchen"

This song on a text by Victor Bluethgen is one of the more dissonant songs, mostly due to tonal text painting. The chicken are depicted in the accompaniment in several different motives:

- Clucking motif 1 - "Disgruntled clucking"
- Clucking motif 2 - "Every day clucking"
- Clucking motif 3 - "Happy clucking"

"Kommst Du nicht herein"

This song is on a text by Karl Kobold, one of Zeisl's friends. It is one of Zeisl's strongest and most expressive songs. The melancholic mood is set by the accompaniment with its relentlessly pounding chords and the whole song is highly chromatic. The melody shows descending lines of chromatic and diatonic steps, a stylistic device that Zeisl used very often in his compositions for expressive lines. The form of the song is stanza 1 - interlude – stanza 2, the interlude is

considerably longer than either stanza. More remarkably, the interlude has its own musical material and provides the highest pitch of the whole song. This interlude expresses the turmoil and grief of the text much more than vocal stanzas.

Conclusion

Zeisl's songs are well-crafted and inspired. All of them are written in Zeisl's personal musical language of the Viennese period (1905-1938). The songs show control of technique and an outstanding talent for portrayal. Many of his songs show a great sense of humor, as an example the song "Der Briefmark" on a poem by Joachim Ringelnatz. Furthermore, Zeisl has a gift for melodies and an aptitude for tone painting. Aside from the very complicated and expressive piano parts, some songs show a very moving talent for simplicity.

Zeisl's music deserves to be standard repertoire in the concert halls of this world. Fortunately, his music is available through the following resources:

Zeisl Music Publishers (Z.M.P.) E-Mail: randols@bslaw.net
Musikhaus Doblinger Verlag
Universal Edition

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