

## WEIMAR PORTRAIT - PAINTING IN SONG

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Wednesday 14 September 2011

6pm – Salon

Presented by Melbourne Recital Centre and Aria Co

Jessica Aszodi – soprano

Hana Crisp – soprano

Peter de Jager – piano

Matthew Thomas – bass-baritone

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### PROGRAM

EISLER – Friendslied - Brecht after Neruda (1950)

KRENEK – Johnny Spielt auf - text by Krenek (1924)

EISLER – Trio part 1 & 2 Leitspruch and Im badezimmer from Tagesbuch - text from Eisler's own diary (1926)

HINDEMITH – 1922, Suite for piano, Op.26 (1922)

I March

III Nocturne

VI Ragtime

WEILL – Der Abschiedsbrief - text by Erich Kästner (1933)

WEILL – Die Movitat von Mackie Masser from *Threepenny Opera* - text by Brecht (1928)

KRENEK – Wechslied zum Tanz - Text by Goethe (1931)

FORTNER – Geh unter, schöne Sonne - text by Hölderlin (1933)

PFITZNER – Abbitte - text by Hölderlin (1921)

DESSAU – Lied der mutter courage from *Mutter courage* – text by Brecht (1939/41)

ULLMANN – Abendphantasie - text by Hölderlin (1943)

DESSAU – Lied einen Deutschen Mutter - text by Brecht (1943)

WEILL – Es Regnet - text by Cocteau (1933)

DESSAU – Friedenslied - text by Brecht (1951)

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### ABOUT THE MUSIC

*No more and no less is required than a kind of music which enables people to gain insight into our times* — Paul Dessau

The music of this concert was conceived in difficult circumstances. From the tumultuous early years of the Weimar Republic to the harsh realities of World War II, these pieces are primary evidence from dangerous times. On sheets of paper, these composers inscribe instructions for how to improve ourselves, how to fight against that which we know to be unjust and how to think independently.

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Between 1919 until 1933, Germany's Weimar Republic experienced massive inflation, an uncertain political climate, changing social attitudes and a swirling constellation of outside influences that by the mid 1920s, had transformed post-World War I Germany into a leading centre for the avant-garde. Weimar art-music reflects varying influences - from emerging American styles such as ragtime and big band, to serialism, 19th century lieder, opera and popular songs of the time.

As we move forward chronologically you will hear the influence of politics increasingly asserting itself. Music is a powerful weapon and during this time, all sides of politics wielded it with precision and intensity.

Three generations later, the lessons learnt during the Nazi era remain frighteningly relevant. Fear continues to drive politics to extremes and people still go to war to eliminate outsiders. Those who experiment in life, politics and art are still ridiculed for breaking with accepted wisdoms. This is, of course, a familiar refrain, but as an acknowledgement to the suffering of those who gave us this beautiful music, we must sing it over again.

**Ernst Krenek** was an Austrian Catholic composer born in 1900. He studied composition in Berlin and conducted at a number of German opera houses. He experimented with many different styles and in the first few years of his career and was influenced by late-romanticism, serialism and jazz. His opera *Jonny Spielt Auf* was incredibly popular and considered a great success until he was targeted by the Nazi party. In 1933, one day after the Nazis gained control of the Reichstag, Krenek's *Triumph der Empfindsamkeit* was pulled from performance. Later, music from *Jonny Spielt auf* was included in the 1938 'Degenerate Music' exhibition and the famous exhibition poster (depicting an African-American saxophone player, whose features had been grotesquely altered and wearing the Jewish star of identification) was a manipulated version of the original poster for *Jonny*. That same year Krenek

left for the United States where he soon began teaching at Vassar College. He eventually settled in California where he remained until his death in 1991.

**Paul Hindemith**, who was born in 1895, began life as a violinist. He began composing seriously in the 1920s and by 1927, was teaching composition in Berlin. His relationship to Nazism was fraught and he spent much of the early Nazi era in Turkey, before emigrating to the United States. He lived in America from 1940 until 1953, when he returned to Europe, settling in Switzerland. Like Krenek, Hindemith was influenced by both popular styles and serialism in his early works. From the late 1920s onward his music developed a leaner, contrapuntal style, heavily influenced by Bach. The suite '1922' is a six-movement work, three of which are heard tonight. The suite is constructed of short movements that each make reference to a recognizable style; a series of homages to some of the period's most influential musical fashions.

Of all the composers who contributed to the music of the Weimar era, **Kurt Weill** is perhaps the best remembered today. Born in 1900 in Dessau, his early education was in instrumental and choral music. His family was Jewish and his father was a cantor. After early studies with Humperdinck in Berlin, in 1920 he became a student of Busoni. Living in Berlin throughout the 1920s he fell into a crowd that included Hans Eisler, Stephan Wolpe and eventually Berthold Brecht. First performed in 1928, the *Threepenny Opera*, his collaboration with Brecht, was little less than a revolution in music theatre. In this work he and Brecht turned opera's conventions on their heads and challenged the audience's morality, ideals of beauty, and politics. Mack the Knife, the song written to introduce *Threepenny's* anti-hero MacHeath, was to become one of Weill's best-known pieces. His politically charged, powerfully tuneful, Weimar era works were well received by the public, but came under increasing fire from the Nazi party. In 1933 Weill learned he was to be arrested, and like many others, made his way to France.

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While in Paris Weill collaborated with French playwright and film-maker Jean Cocteau who wrote the text for *Es Regnet*.

This was one of a number of songs written during his two years in Paris including *Der Abschiedsbrief*. Both songs were written shortly after he left Germany, never to return. In 1935 the composer made his way to America where he eventually received recognition as a composer of musical theatre and wrote a number of successful Broadway shows. He died in New York City in 1950.

**Wolfgang Fortner** was born in Leipzig in 1907 and was a young man at the end of the Weimar era. In 1931 he graduated from the Leipzig Conservatorium with a thesis on the chamber music of Hindemith. His early works were influenced by 19th century Romanticism, Hindemith, Stravinsky and Baroque music. In 1935 he set up a chamber orchestra dedicated to performing new music, called The Heidelberg Chamber Orchestra. That same year he was appointed director of the Heidelberg Hitler Youth Orchestra despite his music having been earlier criticized by the Nazis. After being conscripted in 1940 he joined the Nazi party in 1941. After the war he underwent 'de-Nazification' and later occupied many teaching posts in Germany, most notably at the Darmstadt International Summer Courses.

**Hans Pfitzner** is a problematic figure. Born in 1869 he regarded his younger, more experimental colleagues with suspicion, a view immortalized in his 1917 essay *Danger of Futurists* where he attacked Busoni's *Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music*. He was an outspoken opponent of all things Weimar; the politics that lead to its creation, its government, its changing social attitudes and Germany's growing multiculturalism. He was particularly offended by the influence jazz and atonality were exerting on 'German music'. The featured song *Abbitte* was written in 1922, around the time of Pfitzner's professional apex, to a text by one of the great German Romantic poets, Friedrich Hölderlin. This piece is an archetypal German Lied; its soaring melodies, though intensely chromatic, are in a

diatonic, late-Romantic style. This song plainly echoes the music of Wagner and Mahler, seemingly far removed from the developments seen elsewhere in the arts of the time. Pfitzner was a self-described conservative who aligned himself with anti-Semites, yet his relationship with the Nazis was inconsistent. He never joined the Nazi party and throughout his career maintained close relationships with prominent Jewish artists like Bruno Walter. He associated himself with those whom he thought could help his music, which was less acknowledged than he would have liked. Despite Pfitzner's Nationalism and Nazi sympathies, he was mostly out of favour with the Third Reich. He died in 1949.

*"Terezin served to enhance, not to impede, my musical activities ... by no means did we sit weeping on the banks of the waters of Babylon ... our endeavor with respect to Art was commensurate with our will to live."*  
Viktor Ullmann, 1943

**Viktor Ullmann** was born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire near what is now the Polish-Czechoslovakian border, to Catholic parents of Jewish heritage. As a youth he served in the Austro-Hungarian army and his father was a Colonel in World War I. Like so many composers in this program, he studied with Schoenberg but left to study with Zemlinsky in 1919. By the late 1930's Ullmann was teaching, studying and composing in Prague. In 1939 he was deported to Theresienstadt, a concentration camp that housed up to 60,000 inmates at a time in an army barracks originally designed for 7000 troops. *Abendphantasie* was written while he was imprisoned in Theresienstadt (also called Terezin) concentration camp. The many artists of Theresienstadt continued working throughout their imprisonment and thus the prisoners had a relatively active cultural life. Ullmann's best-remembered work *Der Kaiser von Atlantis (The Emperor from Atlantis)* was written here, though its performance in the camp was halted after the Nazis realised its allegorical message about their Führer. Ullmann was murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz in 1944.

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*"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 at being driven out. But I feel heart-broken over being driven out of this beautiful country in this ridiculous way."*

Hans Eisler at La Guardia Airport in 1948

**Hans Eisler** was born to a Jewish family in Vienna in 1901. After studying atonal techniques with Schoenberg, Eisler moved to Berlin in 1925 and under its influence soon evolved a new musical approach. He became interested in writing music that addressed the gaps between the so-called elite art-forms and popular ones. His music from this period (of which the *Tagebuch*, or 'diary', is an early example) shows the influence of jazz, popular and cabaret song. From the late 1920s, Eisler's music, and the path of his life in general, were intertwined with two important motivators – Communism and Brecht. Eisler's *Friedenslied*, a setting of Brecht's Song of peace, uses the form of strophic lieder to convey a message of hope, composed a few years after the conclusion of World War II and at the beginning of the Cold War. In his poem Brecht declares that there must be 'peace for all', aligning Western symbolism with Eastern and Soviet imagery. This is mirrored in Eisler's musical setting; he utilises two contrasting melodies that are repeated more or less unaltered throughout the song, allowing the accompanying piano to illustrate the changing scenery of the text. The first melody sounds as if it were plucked from an off-kilter jazz ballad, while the second connotes proletariat protest songs with its higher tessitura, four-square rhythms and pentatonic tonality. In 1933 Eisler left Nazi Germany and by 1938 had made his way to the United States eventually settling in Los Angeles, California. Like many European composers fleeing the turmoil in Europe he found employment in American universities and writing film music in Hollywood. Sadly, as the tide of McCarthyism rose, in 1948 Eisler was expelled from the US; his strong personal and family ties to the Communist party had made him an undesirable.

Paul **Dessau** was born in 1894 into a musical Jewish family. He was a fairly successful instrumentalist and also conducted in German opera houses including Cologne Opera and the City Opera of Berlin. He lived in Berlin in the late 1920s, where he became well recognised for his compositions. His music, like Eisler's, is very much influenced by his relationship to Brecht and to Communism. In 1939 Dessau left Europe for New York and eventually made his way to Hollywood, where he formed an association with Schoenberg. In 1948 he left the U.S. and settled in East Germany. In his later life he had a number of important teaching posts and composed many works for the theatre as well as propaganda music for the GDR. Dessau's setting of the Brecht poem *Friedenslied* is not a Lied in the traditional sense but is more closely related to instrumental counterpoint. The two voices function independently of one another yet both provide comment upon the subject matter of the poetry. Dessau was a meticulous orchestrator and his preoccupation with colour can be heard here. He provides much opportunity for colour to speak in his music, without covering the page in instructions. He was a prolific composer and wrote works in almost every imaginable genre including major scores for film as well as orchestral pieces, operas and chamber music. Interestingly he composed both tonal and atonal music concurrently throughout much of his career.

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## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Soprano **Jessica Aszodi** is a graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts and of Victorian Opera's Young Artist program. Her practice encompasses experimental, conventional and contemporary classical repertoire. Her operatic roles include Donna Elvira (Don Giovanni), Echo (Ariadne auf Naxos), Eve (Dienstaf aus Licht), Popova (The Bear), Aminta (Il Re Pastore) and Sesto (Guilio Cesare), for which she was nominated for a Greenroom award. She has appeared with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Royal Melbourne Philharmonic, Speak Percussion, Astra Chamber Music Society and at Melbourne Recital Centre. Festivals at which she has appeared include the Melbourne International Arts Festival and Vivid Sydney Festival (Australia) Macau International Music Festival (China), MusicX (Switzerland), Unusual Encounter (USA) and at the Performing Arts Forum (France). A passionate exponent of new and unusual repertoire, Jessica has given the premieres of more than 30 pieces, by composers including David Shea, Jeffrey Trevino, David Chisholm, Kate Neal and James Rushford. Jessica is the director of Aria Co. She is currently pursuing a Master of Contemporary Music performance at the University of California San Diego.

Soprano **Hana Crisp** holds a Bachelor of Music Performance with First Class Honours from the Victorian College of the Arts. A highly versatile artist, Hana enjoys performing opera, oratorio, art song, chamber music and contemporary music. Hana has featured in many productions, including *The Beggar's Opera* (OzOpera, 2007), *The Seven Deadly Sins* (Australian Youth Orchestra, 2005), *Seven Sequences* (Gasworks theatre and the Dance Exchange 2010) and *One Final Oration* (by David Chisholm 2006). Her concert repertoire includes the Australian premiere of Heinrich von Herzogenberg's *Die Passion*, Mozart's Requiem, Schumann's Requiem, Bach's Mass in B Minor and Christmas Oratorio, Vivaldi's Magnificat, and Pergolesi's Magnificat. An experienced ensemble performer; Hana appears regularly with groups such as Astra

Chamber Music Society, Aria Co and e21 vocal ensemble. Recent highlights include performing in The Song Company's regional touring program and with e21 and Ludovico's band in 'Love and the Art of War' at the Sydney Opera House for the Utzon Music Series. Hana has been the recipient of the Mabel Kent Singing Scholarship, the Athaneum Award, and she was a semi-finalist in the 2008 and 2010 Mietta Song Recital Awards. She was the winner of the 2009 National Liederfest, where she also received the Alan McArthur Memorial Award for best ensemble of voice and piano.

**Peter de Jager** is a composer, arranger, pianist, accompanist and harpsichordist living in Melbourne whose interests encompass early music, contemporary classical music and musical theatre. As a student at the Australian National Academy of Music, Peter was twice a finalist in the Academy's concerto competition. In 2007 Peter won the inaugural Enid Lane Memorial Prize at the Lev Vlassenko Piano competition and first prize at the prestigious Australian International Chopin Competition 2011. Peter has performed as a soloist and as an orchestral pianist for Orchestra Victoria, and also with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and the ANAM Orchestra. Other projects include recitals for Astra Chamber music society and ANAM's Piano! series, performing with Aria Co and music-directing musical-theatre productions for the New Beat Theatre Company. He has performed under the baton of Nicholas Braithwaite, Marko Letonja, Brett Dean and Pierre Boulez, who selected him as a participant in the 2009-10 Lucerne Festival Academies. He has just returned from Boston where he performed in the 2011 Bang on a Can Summer Festival.

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**Matthew Thomas** holds a Master of Music from the ANU School of Music and an Advanced Diploma of Opera from Sydney Conservatorium and is an alumnus of Victorian Opera's Developing Artist Program. He has sung or understudied roles with companies including Opera Australia, Opera Queensland, Victorian Opera, Chamber-made and Tokyo Experimental Opera. On the concert platform he has appeared as a soloist with ensembles including Sydney Philharmonia Choirs, Ho Chi Minh Symphony, Melbourne Bach Chorale, Arko Symphonic Project and Pacific Opera. In 2011 he made his Sydney Opera House debut with Aria Co for Musica Viva and makes his Melbourne Festival debut as a featured performer in the Victorian Opera/Chunky Move produced Assembly. He has been a finalist in numerous national singing competitions such as the 2009 Opera Australia Young Artist Program auditions, the Opera Foundation Australia's New York and London Scholarships and the Opera & Arts Support Scholarship. In addition to studies in music, Matthew holds qualifications in advertising and art history and for many years held a variety of board and committee positions in the arts and government. In 2005 in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the cultural sector he was the ACT recipient of the Young Australian of the Year Award.

**Aria Co would like to thank the following people for all their help on this concert:**

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