BENTLEY ON BIERMANN

Songs and Poems of Wolf Biermann
Translated and Performed by Eric Bentley

ACCOMPANIMENTS BY ALLAN MILLER
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Question and Answer and Question
Morning Dictum of Vice-President Ky
Vice-President Ky’s Dream
Band 10: Soldatenmelodie
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Accompaniments by Allan Miller

Guitar accompaniments by Allan Miller. Piano accompaniments to The Barlach Song and Nothing to it! by Allan Miller. The piano accompaniment to Soldatenmelodie is played by Eric Bentley, and the music itself is Eric Bentley’s interpretation of what Biermann plays for this song on his guitar. All tunes are by Wolf Biermann.

WOLF BIERMANN

Of Jewish background, Wolf Biermann was born in Hamburg in 1936. His father, a worker and a Communist, was killed by the Nazis. A sympathiser with the German Democratic Republic which had been established in 1949, Biermann went to live there in 1953. For about ten years thereafter he was a member of the Social Unity (Communist) Party, only to be read out of it by Walter Ulbricht himself. For in the early Sixties, some of Biermann’s poems and songs were critical of the government.

Not that any poems of this stripe were published; nor did Biermann perform on TV or radio or film. A few poems that could give no offense appeared in print in East Germany. Otherwise Biermann was known there either through personal appearances in club-rooms and concert halls or through type-written and mimeographed sheets which passed from hand to hand. Reporters in this period found East German Youth very familiar with Biermann’s work and even able to quote whole passages from it. This was — as far as he was concerned — what began the trouble. There were also broadcasts by Biermann in West Germany, which the East did not appreciate.

Unluckily for his personal fortunes, Biermann became most outspoken at just the time that his country approached a cultural — and more than cultural — crisis. Two items that appeared in Neuss Deutschland in 1965 were likely to give special offense. One was the poem “Germany: a Winter’s Tale” which is recorded in the present album. The other was a letter to Wolfgang Neuss. And before the latter is quoted, it had better be explained that the title Neuss Deutschland was itself “offensive.” The official Communist daily in the East is called Neuss Deutschland, a paper Biermann ridiculed in his Villon poem (see album). Neuss was able to parody the title with his own name, Neuss being by profession a comedian. Above the title Neuss Deutschland there always appeared the slogan: “Comedians of all lands, unite!” And Neuss was particularly interested in two lands. His paper came out in West Berlin but addressed itself to the East as well — though it could not legally be sold there. Sold, for that matter, it was not, to any great extent, anywhere. It was just a four-page sheet hawked up and down the Kurfürstendamm by Neuss’s friends. Here is the text of the

Biermann Letter it ran in its issue of July—July 1965 (as done into English by Hugo Schmidt):

Much beloved Neuss,

I hope you’ve realized, in the meantime, that you are, in every sense, a persona non grata. By virtue of the very same Communist ambitions which could have brought you into a pleasantly serious disagreement with conditions in West Germany, you were thrown back, a dangerously smelly fish, into the salty dead sea of the homeless Left, into the very medium which appears to us ridiculously unfit for political action.

Germany’s reactionaries know quite well where they are exiling their incorrigible correctors: into the unproductive position of bitterness and desperately obtuse salon revolutions. I have just been reading an observation by Engels, fresh as dew, on the situation of a German poet in 1847:

“On the one hand, being part of German society, he find it impossible to revolt, because the revolutionary elements per se are as yet undeveloped; on the other, he finds the chronic misery that surrounds him too debilitating to rise above it, to act freely against it, and to mock it, without himself falling back into it. For the time being, the only advice to all German poets with a little talent left is to emigrate to civilized countries.”

We know that any and all criticism against conditions in Germany is ludicrous, because the criticized conditions are below the level of all criticism; and we know that all the circumstances in Germany unfortunately do not possess the dignity of historically relevant processes. All conflicts that might arise on German soil are automatically farces, because our dear old German Michel has remained the impotent clown in history ever since the suppression of the peasants’ revolt. I expect little of Germany, which means, of us. I can only guffaw at the schizophrenic alternative: East and West Germany.

The most devastating effect of the beating we constantly receive is our getting used to it; if this will continue long enough, we shall even lend to our sufferings the appearance of the reasonable and ordinary, and, missing greater pleasures, shall decorate ourselves with the crown of thorns of the martyr. The black and blue spots on paper are being replaced by those on our asses. We are moving through our musty German territory and, instead of doffing our hats, we doff our trousers and bare our tanned hides. Thus the pose of “pompously whimpering socialism” is developed in us, that is, in me.

Having no barricades, across the kitchen tables we hurl empty beerbottles at our wives’ backs, and, wet with tears and cold sweat, we unload on our closest friends, poor fellows, our petit-bourgeois hangover.

Constant revolt against political timidity finally turns us into good German backyard-gardeners, and, if we are possessed by a feeling for art, into plaster garden-dwarfs. Neuss, the garden dwarf with the ceramic ax, Biermann, the garden-dwarf with the plaster violin — here they stand in the front garden of world politics on their loan legs and cry the pain off their baked clay. “The World is Bad” — “Oh, Man” — “Germany, Pale Mother”
-- "We Will Have to Die, Then there Will Be Peace"
-- "Ashes Upon Us" -- "Woe to All of Us" -- "Spickenagel, it’s Your Fault!" All my misery is ridiculous; ridiculous as well as justified. Timid bickering between battles.

One has to get used to peace as a musty state of emergency. The thought horrifies me that my fear might grow faster than my hatred. Once that happens, I’m done for.

Good luck, my friend. We’re more likely to meet on the moon than in Germany. Or else, you’ll have to sing a distingusquely reactionary, revanchist, militaristic tune, - then our bald-headed decision-makers will let you in here, as they let all the others in. Remember, at last: It’s the heretics who are fried, not the heathen. May my lamenting disgust and you rid you of your own! Greet Grette from me, kiss Jette, kick Brandt.

Yours,

Biermann.

In addition to publishing this letter and 'Germany, a Winter’s Tale,' Biermann allowed the West Berlin publisher Klaus Wagenbach to issue a whole book of his songs and poems, The Wire Harp.

In December 1965 the East German Chief of Planning Erich Apel shot himself. He did not like the way the Russians seemed to be always getting the best of economic arrangements between their country and his. For whatever reasons, the suicide was followed by a cultural crisis in which government leaders denounced dissident artists. In a 351-line article in Neues Deutschland, Wolf Biermann was described as 'anarchistic' and 'politically perverse.' In the next column The New York Times' account of Biermann's relation to the crisis (January 23, 1966).

As was desired, many writers and other artists took the opportunity to re-affirm their solidarity with their government. Here is a cartoon in which the cartoonist did this by kicking Biermann while he was down:

The caption reads: "What’s with Herr Biermann? Fainted?" "No, just lost consciousness." In the top righthand corner the artist has written: "As my contribution to the discussion."

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East German Poet Is Called Betrayer

BY LESLIE R. COLITT

Wolf Biermann, a fiery young East German poet and balladist whom Germans in both East and West have called the successor to the late poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht, has been denounced by the East German Communist party for his alleged "betrayal of the basic positions of Socialism."

The 29-year-old East Berliner, a man with a drooping mustache and ever-present guitar, went to East Germany from Hamburg in 1953. He was then a member of the Communist-led Free German Youth organization.

He studied economics in East Berlin on a state scholarship and became a member of the Socialist Unity (Communist) party.

Ousted From Party in `65

After writing a satirical play about the Berlin wall he was expelled from the party in 1961. Since then Mr. Biermann has sung his biting songs and retold his incendiary verses before the beleaguered and curious in rented halls, universities and writers' clubs of both Germanies.

Neues Deutschland, the party newspaper, opened the campaign against him last December when it reviewed a collection of his poems published in West Berlin.

From week to week the attacks grew more abusive until on Dec. 15, Erich Honecker, a member of the party's Politburo, reported to its Central Committee: "Biermann's so-called poems reveal his petty bourgeois anarchistic behavior, his arrogance, scepticism and cynicism."

"In the course of the attacks, excerpts from Mr. Biermann's poems were published for the first time in East Germany—In Neues Deutschland. "I am supposed to sing to you of the happiness of a new age. But your ears are deaf from speeches. Create in reality more happiness. And no longer will you need the crazes."

Yours,

Biermann.

Outside of East Germany, liberal and radical critics took Biermann's part. The Zeit of Hamburg published expressions of solidarity from Peter Weiss and Heinrich Böll (December 17, 1965). The Nation of New York ran such a statement by Eric Bentley in its January 10, 1966, issue. Biermann must have been less gratified to be defended at length by Marcel Reich-Ranicki in Die Zeit, since Reich-Ranicki is a refugee from Communist Poland. And Biermann was horrified to be taken up as a martyr by the West German anti-Communist press in general.

On this subject he wrote what was destined to be his last contribution to Neuss Deutschland, for the little paper went out of business soon thereafter. In this poem the statue of a dwarf with which German middle-class people like to adorn their gardens is made the symbol of the West German press:

Es reizt mich nicht die Bohne
wenn mir der deutsche Gartenzwerg
verleiht die Dornenkrone
Dornenkrone, meine Herrn
ist doch noch kein Lorbeer nicht
ach, ich glaub, ihr habt's schon gern
wenn man mir das Rückgrat bricht
Macht doch endlich eine grosse
Lügenfett-Entfeuchtungskur
Leben steht nicht auf dem Spiele
Euer Wohlsleben ja nur.

I'm not in the least irritated
If the German garden dwarf
Confers the crown of thorns on me
Crown of thorns, gentlemen
Is still not exactly a laurel crown
Oh dear, I rather think you're happy
If I get my backbone broken
Go on a crash diet at long last
Take off the fat of your mendacity
Life is not at stake
Only your way of life.

Would Biermann, too, re-affirm his solidarity with the government? He at no point ceased to regard himself as a good Communist. What he had strongly suggested, though, was that some adherents of the regime were bad Communists. That being his position, he could hardly in good faith confess any guilt. In "Reckless Abuse" he had acknowledged that the officials would like him to swim into the net of self-criticism. But he had said then -- and he had to prove it now -- that if they wanted him on bread they must first put him through the meat grinder.

Would they? The days of pure Stalinism were over. Biermann was not shot or even imprisoned, and so he has not been befriended by organizations that go to the help of the incarcerated. His punishment was less severe but more subtle. He was "left alone" but prevented from working, or rather from exhibiting his work, as also from making a living by it. No club-room could invite him to sing any more; no concert-hall could include him in its program. Since, even before, he was never invited onto TV, radio, or film, he was now left with nothing. Or almost nothing. A TV-film, "Biermann speaks and sings," already existed in the West and can still be exhibited in the West. A record album made by him and Neuss for Philips (West German) could still be bought in the West. The Wire Harp was selling there like hot cakes. Could Biermann earn a living by marketing his new work in the West?

On January 12, 1966, the East German Writers' Union declared that their writers had proved unequal to the challenge of a social situation in which greater social responsibility was called for. One conclusion from this premise was that East German writers couldn't be trusted to market their own wares. In future, it was to be strictly understood that their writings belonged to their publisher, the State; and only their publisher would be allowed to sell foreign rights. Such is the law which Germans call "Lex Biermann." It seemed to stop up the last hole. But did it? Biermann was a Hamburger, and his literary rights were looked after by a member of his family in Hamburg. As I write, in 1968, the legalities are still unsettled; as is the whole future of Wolf Biermann.

Meanwhile no further volumes of his work have in fact appeared in the West. Though he has written a good deal in the seclusion of the past two years, only snippets -- such as the Ky poems in this album -- have seen the light of day. Here is the last verse of a song entitled Vietnam which belongs to this period:

Verflucht im WEISSEN HAUS sei
merder-Prasident
-- fur seine Taten
Ich kann und will nun nicht mehr nur
auf Frieden
wart

Die Lunte brennt!
Die Lunte brennt in Vietnam
und nicht zum Spass
Die Erde ist
Die ganzen runden Erde ist
gerammelt voll:
ein knochentrockenes Pulverfass!

Confound in his White House
The Killer-President
-- for what he's doing
I won't just wait for peace to come
I won't sit waiting
The fuse is lit!
The fuse is lit in Vietnam and that's no lie!
The whole world is
The whole round world's a powder keg
The keg is full, the powder's dry!

Notes
For the English text of the songs and poems, the reader is referred to The Wire Harp by Wolf Biermann, translated by Eric Bentley, Harcourt, Brace and World, New York, 1968. For the German text, he is referred to Die Drahtharfe, Klaus Wagenbach, West Berlin, 1965.

BRECHT ON THE POET FRANCOIS VILLON.

Brecht's Threepenny: for the songs in Threepenny Opera Brecht drew freely upon a German translation of Villon.

ND: initials of Neue Deutschland, Communist newspaper, written in the language of functions.

DDR: Deutsche Demokratische Republik, or German Democratic Republic.

Kurella: Alfred Kurella (born 1895), a man who has held various important cultural posts in East Germany during the past dozen years. Attending a Kafka conference in Prague in 1962, he took the anti-Kafka side, and later wrote that, if one swallow does not make a summer, this swallow--Kafka--was in any case a bat.

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On approached in a very gingerly fashion in East

THE BARLACH SONG.

Biermann has written a series of poems named
Portraits. In this one he paints the portrait of the
great sculptor Ernst Barlach, 1870-1938.

NOTHING TO IT! Public criticism of Stalin has been
approached in a very gingerly fashion in East
Germany. And public criticism of the Wall is almost
non-existent. "Ausweis bitte!" is what the border
guards at the Wall in Berlin say to visitors -- "passport
please!"

FRIDAY
Friday, a little dog followed him
Soon it was always there
And in the evening stones hit them both
But they walked on—quite a pair!
BLACK AND WHITE, UNITE, UNITE! etc.

SATURDAY
Saturday, this day was frightfully hot
And a white woman came
Gave him a drink and secretly said:
"You and I think just the same."
BLACK AND WHITE, UNITE, UNITE! etc.

LAST DAY
Sunday, a blue blue day, and he
Lay in the grass so green
Three red carnations, crimson as blood,
On his pale forehead were seen.
BLACK AND WHITE, UNITE, UNITE!
Written on his sign.
And: JIM CROW MUST GO, MUST GO!
And he died all alone
He won't remain alone.

SPAIN TODAY MAY-JUNE, 1960
Franco's Only Solution: Blood
By Jean-Paul Sartre

The Spanish government has assassinated Julián Grimau
Garcia. On the average, at least 400 workers leave Spain
every day to try to find work abroad. I believe that these
two facts are intimately related. The emigration—a veris-
able hemorrhage—is a measure of the insane ferocity of a
regime which has increased exploitation and suppression
to the point of depriving itself of the manpower it needs.
These workers are leaving because they actually can no
longer live; the annual per-capita income amounts to $883;
if one appreciates the incredible inequality that exists,
those figures are a sufficient illustration of the misery re-
sulting from a small number of people exercising power
over the vast majority. It is the brutality of this privileged
group which is undermining Franco's regime: the country
can no longer afford to have its riches thus plundered. If
the Spanish people were united, Franco could not last one
more day.

The government is well aware of that. It must do its
utmost to prevent such unity from coming into existence;
it is lost unless it increases its terror from day to day. By
every means available: civil liberties are suspended, the
police are torturing people, the courts hand down prison
terms of fifteen to twenty years, and even the death
penalty. In October, 1960, Anastasio Merino was condemned
to die. He is forty three years old. The indictment tells us
"that he happened to be in places where eighteen persons
belonging to the Right were shot at . . . and it was said that
it was he who shot at these people."

That was at the beginning of the Civil War: he was then
nineteen years old. The case of Julián Grimau is hence not
an isolated one and nobody could believe for a moment that
he was condemned for crimes allegedly committed twenty-
five years ago. He was tortured and killed because he was
a Communist and because he attempted to organize resis-
tance against Franqui's oppression. If the police seize another
responsible Communist tomorrow, they will torture and kill
him as they did Grimau.

Franco knows only one solution: blood; it must be spilled.
And more and more, the terror can only survive by getting
ever more terrible. The condemnation of Grima is a challenge by the government to the people: if the Republicans should start uniting, we shall kill them. The victim was well chosen: who, in the West, will bother about a Communist? I recall the statement made, at a recent demonstration in France, by a police sergeant to the cops who surrounded him: "There are only Communists left, you may proceed. . ." They did proceed and killed eight people. The reason why I have such genuine respect for any Communist is the fact that he has assumed every possible risk in joining the party, that he has deliberately accepted the duty to fight all bourgeois societies.

The only mistake the sergeant made. . . was to assume that the massacre would remain a complete secret. Forty thousand people were in the streets on that day. Three days later we were seven hundred thousand at the funeral of the victims. Those criminals had brought about what a hundred conspirators could not have done: unity among the trade unions. The assassination of Grima, too, is a crime far too savage to be accepted in silence as those responsible for it may have hoped; to judge from the indignation which has become manifest throughout the world, one may suppose that a cold and profound indignation must exist today in the streets of Madrid. By imposing the death penalty on that courageous man, the court martial has, I am sure, hastened the unification of the Spanish resistance movement.

BALLAD OF THE SOLDIER IN WORLD WAR III.

Brecht wrote a poem, famous in Germany not least because it lost him his German citizenship in 1933, called Legend of the Dead Soldier. It told how Kaiser Wilhelm had the body of a dead hero dug up and re-induced into the Army so it could die a second hero's death:

And they took the soldier away with them
A bright blue sky was on land.
When you took your helmet off you could see
The stars of the Fatherland.

And into his decomposing corpse
They poured some alcohol
And hung two nurses on his arm
And his half uncovered gal.

The band goes Boom-didi-Boom in front
As they play a snappy march
And the soldier just as he been taught
Throws out his legs from his arse.

With Boom-didi-Boom and See-you-soon
Priest and gal and pups
And the dead soldier in the midst
Like a monkey in his cups.

So many danced and revelled there
The soldier could not be seen.
The stars could see him from the sky
Where no one's ever been.

And the stars aren't always in the sky
For lo the dawn cometh
But the soldier just as he been taught
Marched to a hero's death.

BALLAD OF FREDI ROHMSHEISL.

The new dances of the Fifties and Sixties in which partners don't touch were banned in East Germany as Western and decadent.

EARLY MORNING.

Milk is not delivered on Sunday, so you go out for it.

THE SINGER'S INAUGURAL ADDRESS.

This poem makes direct reference to official opposition to Biermann.


GERMANY, A WINTER'S TALE.

The title doesn't refer to Shakespeare but to a poem by Heinrich Heine.

das lied om schlimmsten
weisst du was das schlimmste
dir im leben ist
was macht dich zum sklaven
was macht dich zum knecht
ach das schlimmste ists ja
ach dass es so ist
dass ihr unrecht leidet
so als ob es so sein muesst.

und was ist das schlimmste
an der heuchelei
was haeft euch in ketten
spottet noch dabei
ach das schlimmste ists ja
ach dass es so ist
dass ihr falschen sinn
saget einfach hin
und ihr doch die wahrheit wisst.

ich weiss was das schlimmste
dir im leben ist
wenn du deinem Herren
treu ergeben bist
ach das schlimmste ists ja
ach dass es so ist
dass wer alles duldet
lebt und schon gestorben ist.

THE SONG OF THE WORST THING

Do you know the worst thing
In the life you live.
Making you a lackey
Making you a slave
Well, my friend, the worst thing
Is that all of you
Tolerate injustice
Just as if it had to be.

Do you know the worst thing
About hypocrisy
Making you a fool, not
Letting you be free
Well, my friend, the worst thing
Is that all of you
Carelessly let fall
What's not so at all
Even though you know the truth.

In the life you live, I
Know what's worst for you:
When you are obedient
When you're tried and true...
Well, my friend, the worst thing
Is that any man
Who puts up with all things
Lives but is already through.
Soldatenmelodie

Soldat, Soldat in grauer Norm,
Soldat, Soldat in Uniform,
Soldat, Soldat, ihr seid soviel,
Soldat, Soldat, ich finde nicht,
Soldat, Soldat, ein Angesicht.
Soldaten seh'n sich alle gleich,
lebendig und als Leich.

Soldat, Soldat, wo geht das hin?
Soldat, Soldat, wo ist der Sinn?
Soldat, Soldat, im nächsten Krieg,
Soldat, Soldat, gibt es kein'n Sieg.
Soldat, Soldat, die Welt ist jung,
Soldat, Soldat, so jung wie du,
die Welt hat einen tiefen Sprung.
Soldat, am Rand stehst du.

(Literal, prose translation of Soldatenmelodie:

Soldier, soldier, in standard grey, Soldier, soldier,
in uniform, Soldier, soldier, there are so many of you, Soldier, Soldier, it's no game, Soldier, soldier, I do not find, Soldier, Soldier, a face. Soldiers all look alike, alive or as corpses.

Soldier, soldier, where are you headed? Soldier, soldier, where is the meaning? Soldier, soldier, in the next war, Soldier, soldier, there is no victory. Soldier, soldier, the world is young, Soldier, soldier, as young as you. The world has a deep rift in it. Soldier, you stand on its brink.)

ERIC BENTLEY

Eric Bentley is already wellknown to Folkways listeners on account of his BENTLEY ON BRECHT (FH 5434), SONGS OF HANNS EISLER (FH 5433) and other albums. Brecht and Eisler are, of course, Biermann's great models. He has written of the latter as follows:

BRECHT ON THE RECORD

You will want to own these five record albums:

BENTLEY ON BRECHT
music by Weill, Eisler, Wolpe, Dessau
Folkways (FH 5434)

BRECHT BEFORE THE UNAMERICAN COMMITTEE
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a musical extravaganza, music by Arnold Black. Also Dear Old Democracy, 4 songs by E. Bentley ASCH (FL 5831)

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Rare circumstance of a round human being! Neither his tongue nor his brain showed any cleavage, Nor was there any split in him between top and bottom. Just where on other men's bodies you'd find a weak spot Just where other men have got their backs broken Arches powerfully forward his cheerful belly And swings up and down in uproarious laughter At stupidity in music, and not only in music. Thus the big man spared us bigger words.

Marvelling still today we newcomers travel Hither and yon over that tiny globe. O spherical flatland,
Wondrous paradox! We never Get to The end.

And it was Hanns Eisler's son, Georg, who introduced Eric Bentley to Wolf Biermann in the spring of 1965. Biermann sang to Eisler and Bentley in his apartment, and that was the beginning of the Bentley-Biermann collaboration. Eric Bentley wrote about Biermann in the Winter 1966 issue of Partisan Review, and took his side in an editorial written for The Nation, 10 January 1966. A year later he had completed a translation of The Wire Harp. During 1966 and 1967 he sang Biermann songs at peace demonstrations and for student groups. On October 6, 1967, the BBC (London) broadcast a forty-minute Biermann program arranged and presented by Eric Bentley. A similar program was broadcast in the United States by Pacifica Radio in 1968.