

Glorious Kennedy Center concert honors composers persecuted by Nazis

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by Marsha Dubrow, [D.C. Arts & Travel Examiner](#)

Composers who fled the Nazis -- or were killed by them -- were celebrated in a glorious musical tribute at Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. on November 14.

Music's enduring power to help us survive was illustrated exquisitely in the "Fugitives" concert created by Steven Blier, [The New York Festival of Song's](#) artistic director and pianist, and sung brilliantly by tenor [Joseph Kaiser](#) and mezzo soprano [Kate Lindsey](#).

Lindsey and Kaiser beautifully performed the wide range of music, from *lieder* to cabaret to operetta, moving gracefully between romantic and political passion, poignancy, yearning, comedy including a few soft shoe steps, and yes, misery.

The concert featured works by two composers who were killed at Auschwitz; other composers who escaped Nazi Germany, only to eventually commit suicide or die naturally but in obscurity; and others who fled to new fame in United States.

The best-known were, of course, [Kurt Weill](#) who collaborated on Broadway shows with Ira Gershwin and Alan Jay Lerner years after his famed collaboration with Bertolt Brecht; [Erich Korngold](#) who won [Oscars](#) for two of his many Hollywood film scores; and Arnold Schoenberg, "the J. Robert Oppenheimer of classical music, the man who exploded tonality and propounded twelve-tone music as the wave of the future," wrote Blier in his fascinating program notes. Blier's introductions, eloquent and often witty, added perspective and knowledge, especially about the lesser-known or unknown composers whose music was forbidden and vilified by the Nazis.

Most, but not all of these eleven composers were Jewish. A few were merely dissidents. Nazis regarded all such artists as "degenerate" or "*entartete*". Hitler declared on July 18, 1937, "...we are going to wage a merciless war of destruction against degenerate art," according to the book "Art Under A Dictatorship" by Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt. A 1938 exhibition in Düsseldorf, entitled *Entartete Musik* condemned all music that Hitler considered non-Aryan, including jazz, atonal works, and everything by Jewish composers, from [Felix Mendelssohn](#) to Arnold Schoenberg.

The "Fugitives" concert began with art songs or *lieder* by Schoenberg, Korngold, and Alexander Zemlinsky who had been a protégé of Brahms and had taught almost all the composers in the program. Zemlinsky had been a celebrity in Europe, but he fell into obscurity after fleeing to New York in 1938 and suffering a stroke in 1939. His fate was the opposite of his hopeful song, "Eyes on the Sea" which ends, "Deeply and completely, Our hearts will rest once again, Rest from storm and discord."

Many of the songs resonate greatly today, like Weill's "The Lottery Agent's Tango" which opines "It's paved with loss, this pathway to success." [Hanns Eisler's](#) songs used lyrics by Bertolt Brecht, "The World is in Need of Change", and by Kurt Tucholsky – "You were sent to the trenches by the landed aristocrats..."

Eisler received two Oscar nominations for film scores, but eventually was targeted by the [House Committee on Un-American Activities](#) (HUAC) and was deported back to Germany in 1948. Eisler wrote that he left America with "bitterness and infuriation. I could well understand it when in 1933 the Hitler bandits put a price on my head and drove me out...But I feel heart-broken over being driven out of this beautiful country (U.S.) in this ridiculous way."

Tucholsky was a prolific essayist, journalist, and lyricist whom Blier compares to Weill and to Dorothy Parker. Blier told the audience that Tucholsky's cabaret song "Sleepless Lady" "speaks to anyone who sleeps with guys" -- the audience loved it.

Tucholsky managed to escape to Sweden, but was denied citizenship. He committed suicide at the age of 45 in 1935.

The second part of the concert featured two composers who were killed in Auschwitz, and one whose works have all but disappeared. Georg Jokl had been a successful composer and pianist in Austria and Germany before he was forced to flee in 1939 to New York. He lived there for 15 years, "but his creative life was crushed. Today, he's non-Google-able," Blier told the audience.

Viktor Ullmann and Hans Krása were deported to the concentration camp Theresienstadt (Terezin), which the Nazis tried to portray as a Jewish arts colony. Like many of the 50,000 Jewish artists at Theresienstadt, Ullmann and Krása were sent later to Auschwitz where they died in the gas chambers.

The program's last part honored fugitive composers who escaped to freedom. In Weill's "How Much Longer", a woman sings to her abusive lover, "You tormented me, you shattered me..." Blier explained, "The song was broadcast behind German enemy lines, and any German would know that the woman was Germany and the abusive lover was Hitler." The final work on the program was "Peace Song".

"The story of this era is permeated with terror, displacement, cruelty, and injustice," Blier said. "But it is also filled with stories of courage, adaptation, and rebirth... in the end the forbidden music would not be silenced."

And at the end of "Fugitives", the audience whooped and hollered -- *most* un-Washington-like -- during its standing ovation. The concert, as heart-rending as it was gorgeous, was presented by the [Vocal Arts Society](#).

The Washington Post review said, "Everything that a song recital can achieve, in terms of musical revelation, vocal excellence and audience engagement, was exemplified" and termed Blier a "renowned programming genius."

The November 14 recital coincided with the 70th anniversary week of [Kristallnacht](#), "Night of Broken Glass" November 9-10, 1938, when Nazis staged riots against the Jews of Germany. The terrifying rampage of destruction and killing was a harbinger of the Holocaust.