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MUSIC REVIEW | 'FUGITIVES'

Tracking Composers on the Run

By STEVE SMITH

A beloved song can conjure all manner of associations: a time, a place, a loved one. For Steven Blier, a pianist and the artistic director of the New York Festival of Song, Alexander Zemlinsky's "Meeraugen" suggested a concert. From that lone spark came "Fugitives," a program that Mr. Blier presented with Kate Lindsey, a mezzo-soprano, and Joseph Kaiser, a tenor, at Merkin Concert Hall on Tuesday night.



The overarching theme was the disruption in European music and culture caused by [Hitler](#)'s rise to power. Starting with works of late Romantic opulence, Mr. Blier followed a thread through the arch, politicized cabaret of the Weimar period to songs by artists whose careers (and in some cases lives) were ended by the Nazis, finishing with music by composers who fled to America. All were Jewish, and all had their output branded as "entartete" — degenerate.

The conductor [James Conlon](#) has asserted that Hitler changed the course of musical history through censorship, displacement and genocidal policies that caused the deaths of creators like Hans Krasa and Victor Ullmann, represented here. Mr. Blier proposed a similarly sweeping thesis: that Hitler destroyed the German art song tradition, exemplified by a group of selections by Zemlinsky ("Meeraugen" included), [Arnold Schoenberg](#), Franz Schreker and Erich Korngold.

There was more to the story than just the rise of the Nazis, of course. Schoenberg's move through atonality to serialism had less to do with politics than with bucking a depleted tradition. But as the concert shifted into the spiky rhythms and black sass expressed by [Kurt Weill](#), Hanns Eisler and their ilk, you sensed that for all the gains, something dear was lost. (That the lyrical concerns in these selections sounded so utterly relevant today only sharpened their sting.)

The poignant ache of numerous songs accumulated throughout, abetted by the strong, stylish singing. Ms. Lindsey in particular dipped into surprising reserves of power and expressiveness. In sum, the concert was an unqualified success; I can recall many Festival of Song programs as illuminating and entertaining, but none so profoundly moving.

*The program repeats on Thursday at Merkin Concert Hall, 129 West 67th Street, Manhattan; (212) 501-3303 or nyfos.org.*