

Eisler Residency Experience Report

What does a composer need, in order to thrive? Enough time, and the right environmental conditions. Adjusting to a new place and finding out how to gain creative stimulation from a changed way of life can reveal so much. Before moving to Leipzig and settling into the Hanns Eisler Haus in May 2019, I had spent my entire life in the United Kingdom: in the well-to-do charm of Edinburgh, the city in which I grew up; in the academic cloisters of Cambridge and in the chaotic, creative scramble of Glasgow, two vastly differing cities in which I studied.

Leipzig, in my experience, was not an immediate city but one which unfolded itself to me gradually: first, parks and public spaces, the calm pace of life, and an unhurried sense of urban economic development; then the strong cultural life of the city, in its museums, venues and concert halls; then meeting musicians and other composers who, despite the relatively small new-music scene, have great cultural vision and make a warm and progressive open community. Leipzig, I found out, is a beautiful and unpretentious city with huge potential.

The Eisler Haus itself made its way quickly into my heart: the opportunity to stay in a place of such historical interest, newly decorated with great refinement and attention to relevant detail, was unique and touching. It is a small apartment, but had everything I needed for a five-month residency – plenty of natural light, a good upright piano, and a variety of plants made this a very comfortable space to live and work in. It is within walking distance of the wonderful east side of the city, as well as the centre. Living in the birthplace of Hanns Eisler was of course very special, and Eisler's musical craft, his uncompromising political and artistic energy, and his strength of character floated around me as ideals to attain.

So far in my life, I have been neither a prolific nor prodigious composer: nonetheless, music and my artistic sensibility are constantly awake in me, always seeking outlets. Living in Leipzig gave me the time and space I needed to think deeply through what I am doing as a

composer and as a human being. I wrote two significant new pieces, including 'Dissonance of Emancipation', which was premiered by Ensemble Avantgarde at the Gewandhaus as the culmination of my residency, and I worked on a multitude of smaller projects. I made connections and friendships that I already know will be long-lasting.

Following my residency, I feel more artistically honest and brave and less intimidated by the flux of quick opinions and self-aggrandising attitudes that are often prevalent in the more competitive, saturated new-music locales. I now feel a stronger connection with human endeavour in general: politically, socially, culturally. The summer of 2019 that I spent in Leipzig seemed to stretch on forever in its enveloping warmth and intense sun. Thanks to that, I had a glimpse of things in the long run. My creative ideas could flow without limit. And, despite 2019 being a year of mass social unrest and protest to which a musical composition could hardly claim to contribute anything (as much as Hanns Eisler, in his own very different times, may have tried), I renewed my conviction of the importance of what we, as composers and creative people, can do: expand our imaginative horizons, and invoke remarkable experiences of the possible.

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