

## Author



Alexander Phillips became interested in the field of literature from the German Democratic Republic (GDR) through reading various works, many of them unknown in the English speaking world. He was also interested in the reception of the works of German classicism, especially Goethe, in the GDR. Professor Biendarra pointed him to a few materials, and he found himself reading about this debate in the Academy of Arts. Although investigating this topic showed him how ideology impacted literature in the GDR, Alexander's research led him to realize that issues of ideology and literature are universal. Alexander is spending a year studying in Berlin through a grant from the German Academic Exchange Service.

### Key Terms

- ♦ Antifascist-Democratic Renewal
- ♦ Classical Heritage
- ♦ Cultural Politics
- ♦ German Misery Thesis

# History, Heritage, and the German Spirit: Johann Faustus and the Threat to the Ideological Reshaping of East Germany

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## Abstract

The ideological project of “antifascist-democratic renewal” undertaken by Marxists in East Germany after 1945 included a need to understand German history in a way that would legitimize the new socialist state. When the socialist composer Hanns Eisler published his libretto *Johann Faustus*, it was perceived by Socialist Unity Party leadership as being antithetical to the party's efforts to redefine history. In spite of his use of themes friendly to Marxist ideology, Eisler was attacked for failing to uphold the party's platform, implying that he was undermining efforts to ideologically reshape Germany after Nazi terror. By examining the libretto as well as the proceedings of the subsequent debate and situating them in their historical and cultural contexts, it becomes evident that Eisler's use of the German literary tradition coupled with his portrayal of history seriously problematized the official interpretation of history touted by the East German communist party in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The ensuing debate, in which the libretto was demonized to the point that Eisler could not bring himself to complete the opera, reveals much about the ideological problems facing East Germany in those early years, as well as the party's anxiety about its own grip on power.

## Faculty Mentor



Alexander Phillips' paper grew out of an independent study on the literature of East Germany's Democratic Republic. After background reading of literary histories, Alex narrowed his interest to *Johann Faustus*, a libretto written in the 1950s by the well-known composer Hanns Eisler. Over the course of the quarter, Alex researched the text further by reading material that I suggested and drew up an ambitious and interesting research proposal. In his paper, Alex developed a nuanced understanding of the critical connections between the realm of art and cultural politics in a state governed by surveillance and censorship, which is a topic that has implications for other historical moments and national literatures as well. I am pleased to see Alex go on to graduate school in the German program at Cornell University and wish him the best of luck!

**Anke Biendarra**  
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## Introduction

In the year 1952 the East German publishing house *Aufbau* released the libretto *Johann Faustus* by the composer Hanns Eisler, who hoped that upon the completion of the music the opera would become one of the first great cultural products of the newly founded East German state, the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The legend of Faust, the medieval scholar who made a pact with the devil, had, since its origins in the sixteenth century, inspired such writers as Marlowe, Lessing, Goethe, and Thomas Mann. Drawing upon this tradition, Eisler used the story to confront the problems of German history at a time in which the Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, or SED) was actively attempting to reinterpret that history in a way that would serve to legitimize the power of a socialist state on German soil. The controversy the libretto caused, which culminated in a series of debates in the GDR's Academy of Arts (*Akademie der Künste*), drew in such important contemporary cultural figures as Bertolt Brecht, Johannes R. Becher, and Alexander Abusch. Eisler's defenders praised the text for actively confronting the problems of German history; others attacked it as pessimistic, ahistorical, and a mistreatment of the "*klassisches Erbe*," or "classical heritage," a canon of works viewed as being in accord with the cultural program of some of the German Marxists of the period. How could a cultural figure as committed to socialist ideology as Hanns Eisler produce a libretto that, while seemingly espousing traditional Marxist values, nevertheless came into such conflict with party doctrine? By placing the libretto and the documentation of the ensuing debate in their theoretical and historical contexts, it becomes apparent that the attacks on Eisler were motivated primarily by an alleged failure on Eisler's part to produce a piece conforming to SED attempts to emphasize and appropriate self-legitimizing threads in German history and culture as part of a project of "anti-fascist democratic renewal." The *Johann Faustus* libretto became the object of censorship for directly contradicting the SED's self-legitimizing project of "anti-fascist democratic renewal" on two levels: first because Eisler had failed to treat the classical heritage canon as a positive basis for his new work, and second because the libretto's representation of the course of German history and the role of the German intellectual stood in contrast with that of the SED.

### The New Interpretation of History in the GDR

The Marxists' engagement with history after the end of the Second World War and their return from exile was

focused to a great extent on explaining how German history could have resulted in the catastrophe of the Nazi regime. In an attempt to rationalize the historical roots of Nazism, Alexander Abusch, who would later become the GDR Minister of Culture, posited a Marxist interpretation of the German Misery Thesis (*deutsche Misere*) in his book *Irrweg einer Nation (A Nation on the Wrong Path)*, written and first published at the end of his exile in Mexico and then released in Germany in 1946. In the introduction to the book, Abusch argued that the rise of the Nazi regime could be traced back through German history to a series of historical "turning points," beginning with the peasant uprising of 1525 and leading up to the rise of Hitler (Abusch 6). The turning points Abusch cites consist of a series of both class conflicts and reform movements from government leaders, all of which failed to bring about genuine change, leaving the lower classes in a perpetual state of bondage. Abusch cites the sheer brutality of the nobility, the failure of the bourgeoisie to topple the aristocracy, and the occasional complicity of would-be revolutionaries with the established powers as having hindered a Marxist teleological trajectory in German history and thus allowing for the rise of the Nazi Party. Thus, in spite of German industrial might at the turn of the twentieth century, the nation's class development was still far behind France, England, and the United States, with the proletariat stuck in the remnants of feudal bondage (Abusch 199).

This interpretation of German history may have given Marxists living in exile the comfort of explaining how it came to be that they had had to flee Germany. However, after the foundation of the GDR the SED came to view the theory's emphasis on the consistent failure of Germany's progressive forces as a negation of the trends they regarded as progressive and were attempting to appropriate as historical antecedents to justify their power. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels identify the proletariat's battle against the bourgeoisie as being an international battle, but one in which the proletariat of each individual nation was responsible for overthrowing its own bourgeoisie (32; ch. 1). If the German Misery Thesis were to be accepted, then how could its core theories be reconciled with the existence of a German communist state? Official acceptance of the German Misery Thesis would have proven to be problematic at a time when the SED was trying to legitimize the GDR against the instability of the post-war years. Thus, the SED explicitly rejected it in 1950, less than a year after the founding of the GDR, in favor of a greater emphasis on what it regarded as the progressive, humanist, and democratic traditions of East German history (Dorpalen 48). Rather than speaking of a long history of misery stemming

from reactionary victories, the GDR leadership came to favor the view of German history as an equal split between the reactionary and progressive forces, with the GDR embodying the heir of the progressive forces and capitalist West Germany threatening to resume the fatal reactionary path that, in the official view, had already brought about two World Wars (Iggers 66). The foundation of the GDR, therefore, was a victory in both the resistance to fascism and the centuries old struggle of the progressive, humanist German spirit against the oppressive ruling classes. The Soviet victory, in turn, came to be viewed as assistance to the oppressed proletariat in the struggle against the bourgeoisie in their own country.

Both the German Misery Thesis and the SED's alternative interpretation of history stressed a dichotomy between the "reactionary" and the "progressive/humanist/democratic." The latter referred to historical persons, events or developments, be they revolutionaries, uprisings, or reforms, that would have brought about greater freedom for the workers and challenged the might of their oppressors. The German Misery Thesis differed from the SED's interpretation in that it suggested that the rise of Hitler meant that the progressive spirit, which had shown itself in events such as the Revolution of 1848, had ultimately been disempowered to the point where it could not thwart Hitler's rise. On the other hand, the SED preferred the notion that the revolutionary proletariat had not been crushed, but rather that its inherent progressivism had survived through the Weimar Republic and the rule of Hitler, and had finally been allowed to fulfill its historic task thanks to the Soviet victory. The GDR, with the SED in power, was thus the fulfillment of that historic task.

With the SED's explicit rejection of the German Misery Thesis in favor of this more supportive view, the theory became taboo in East German discourse. Even Abusch, whose *Irrweg einer Nation* articulated the German Misery Thesis, later avoided criticism by aggressively promoting this party view (Davies 588). The 1949 edition of *Irrweg einer Nation* included an epilogue in which Abusch denied having promoted the German Misery Thesis and accused West Germany of being the new home of imperialist German reactionary forces, now supported by the United States. He added a second epilogue to the 1951 edition in which he again sharply attacked the West as being a child of imperialist capitalist forces that sought to make Germany the battleground for the next war (Abusch 253-290). During the debate in the Academy of Arts Abusch even went so far as to criticize Eisler's defender Ernst Fischer for not seeing "that the victory of the Soviet Army in 1945 set free

the genuinely present strength of the German people, that had long fought for freedom and finally helped them to this upswing" (in Bunge 57)<sup>1</sup>. Without repudiating his own work, Abusch here represents history in a way very different from the German Misery Thesis and closer to the self-legitimizing view that the SED was propagating, emphasizing that communism actually could claim a long historical heritage in Germany, which, rather than having been squelched under Hitler, was finally able to blossom fully due to the victory of the Soviet Army. An acknowledgement of the German Misery Thesis would discredit this view, and thus call into question the entire legitimizing mythology the SED was attempting to create for itself.

### "Classical Heritage" in Anti-Fascist Discourse

Out of this effort to play up the progressive, humanist past evolved the maxim of "*klassisches Erbe*" or "classical heritage" (Schnell 111-112). Eisler's critics Abusch, Becher, and Girnus looked back at the great German authors of the past, in particular Lessing, Schiller and Goethe, and attempted to interpret their works in a way that would support the humanist image the new state wished to project. In spite of failed revolutions and the rise of Hitler, the values the GDR wished to claim for itself had not only been present throughout all of German history, but had manifested themselves in the finest works of Germany's most outstanding cultural figures. "Classical heritage" thus referred to a specifically defined canon of works that the GDR could appropriate and represent in such a way as to give the impression that such works supported the political power structure of the GDR (Emmerich 84-86). This officially sanctioned canon was a means through which the GDR could link its own rhetoric of democratic, anti-fascist humanism to the finest cultural output of Germany's artists and intellectuals.

The notion of classical heritage and its role in a project of "anti-fascist democratic renewal" had been articulated before the fall of the Nazi regime by the Marxist literary theorist and critic Georg Lukács, whose writings greatly informed the cultural politics in the Soviet Occupied Zone/GDR after 1945 (Ohlreich 257). In his "Faust Studies," written in 1940 and published in 1947 as part of the volume *Goethe and his Age (Goethe und seine Zeit)*, Lukács described the importance of this attempt to connect to positive elements of German cultural history and its role in the process of German democratic renewal:

1. All translations from Bunge and from Eisler's libretto are my own.

The return to this past is indeed a necessary start toward something new, a taking-stock of the historical heritage. No people can renew itself without this condition. But how it renews itself, how and to which point in the past it links itself, what it considers as a heritage is of utmost importance (Lukács 161).

Lukács provides here a justification for the establishment of a specific canon that could be used as part of a project of ideological “renewal,” while also rejecting other elements—be they works, authors, or artistic movements—that might conflict with such a project. As demonstrated in the debate over *Johann Faustus*, the classical heritage became an integral part of an elaborate system of censorship to be used against any author who failed to support the SED’s efforts to ideologically reshape Germany.

As a further argument towards staking an ideological claim to the great literature of German classicism, the official policy viewed works such as *Faust* as having arisen in a time in which capitalism had not entirely perverted the artistic output of the reigning bourgeois class. Lukács articulated this view in the “Faust Studies,” arguing that the publication of the second part of Goethe’s *Faust* could be considered a milestone marking the end of the freedom of artistic production from the forces of capitalism. According to Lukács:

The more the general influence of capitalism extends into reality the more difficult this struggle [to preserve true art against capitalist influence] becomes. For, as social relations grow increasingly abstract, the less possible it becomes to disentangle the beauty of the human essence; to see and express artistically the unity of man despite his fragmentation, caused by the capitalist division of labour. (242)

Lukács situates the German classical literature as occurring after the bourgeois class had risen to the status of a dominant cultural force, but before capitalism had succeeded in influencing literary production in such a way that the resulting body of literature would be ideologically incompatible with a socialist state. Lukács championed realism as the most useful literary movement in the proletarian class struggle, arguing specifically for “reflection” (*Widerspiegelung*), meaning that ideal literature was one in which the totality of life (as opposed to the fragmentation of society and general alienation that Marxism views as the results of a capitalist system) was objectively revealed through artistic

representation (Schnell 112). Lessing, Schiller, and Goethe had become the official models for GDR literature, which allowed the SED to appropriate them for its claims of championing an anti-fascist tradition. Accusing an artist of working outside of this framework was therefore to accuse the artist of undermining the legitimizing project of anti-fascist renewal, and indeed, his rejection of the classical heritage turned out to be one of the main accusations leveled at Eisler.

### “A Central Figure of the German Misery Thesis”: The Challenge of *Johann Faustus* to Official History

Hanns Eisler’s *Johann Faustus* appeared at the height of GDR efforts to appropriate elements of the history and culture of Germany that it viewed as compatible with the image it wished to project. The story is set against the background of the sixteenth century Peasants’ War led by the theologian and contemporary of Martin Luther, Thomas Müntzer. Eisler’s Faust, in spite of having been born into the peasant class and being sympathetic to their cause, fails to support the peasants when they take up arms against their feudal lords. Ultimately his pact with Mephistopheles serves to ensure the victory of the aristocracy over the peasantry. The contrast to Goethe’s Faust character is strong. The motive for Faust’s pact with the devil in Goethe’s story lies in his constant desire to strive for new knowledge and experience. In making the bet with the devil, Goethe’s Faust says:

If ever I lay me on a bed of sloth in peace,  
That instant let for me existence cease!  
If ever with lying flattery you can rule me  
So that contented with myself I stay,  
If with enjoyment you can fool me,  
Be that for me the final day!”

(“Werd’ ich beruhig je mich auf ein Faulbett legen,  
So sei es gleich um mich getan!  
Kannst du mich schmeichelnd je belügen  
Daß ich mir selbst gefallen mag,  
Kannst du mich mit Genuß betrügen  
Das sei für mich der letzte Tag!”) (1692-1697).

This characteristic of Goethe’s *Faust* ultimately is the quality that leads to his salvation. In the final scene of the second part of Goethe’s *Faust*, the angels say “Who e’er aspiring, struggles on, / For him there is salvation” (“*Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, / Den können wir erlösen*”) (11937-11938).

Eisler's Faust, on the other hand, is portrayed as the sort of German intellectual who supports reactionary forces by retreating from the problems of the world around him back into his academic sphere. Born into the peasant class, Faust supported the Peasants' War under Müntzer, yet failed to stand by the revolutionaries when the decisive battle came. This Faust is the archetype of the sort of intellectual the proponents of the German Misery Thesis regarded as having abetted the rise of Hitler. In Act I Scene 1, Faust encounters Karl, a peasant blinded and reduced to begging after the defeat of Müntzer. Faust dismisses the revolution, saying that the peasants should never have taken up arms. Karl, on the other hand, claims that the revolution failed in part due to treason, weakness and disunity among their ranks, an assertion to which Faust is conspicuously silent (Eisler 18). When Karl implies that the weakness of the intellectuals led to the failure of the peasant uprising, Faust weakly tries to defend himself by telling of Archimedes who, according to Faust, locked himself away in pursuit of his academic pursuits as the people of his city were butchered by the Huns (Eisler 19-20). Instead of the great, striving spirit that Lukács saw in the figure of Goethe's Faust, there is no question that Eisler's Faust is, as Ernst Fischer put it, a central figure of the German Misery Thesis (see Bunge 65 and 27).

His decision to enter into the pact with Mephistopheles is grounded largely in his desire to escape the ugly reality in which he finds himself entangled. Upon agreeing to the pact Faust tells Mephistopheles, "I want to travel, where I will see no cripples, where I will see no ruins, where I will see no traitors—where nobody knows me. Only away, away!" (Eisler 35). In the debates over the libretto, Eisler's critics argued that this implication of Faust as a traitor to the people's cause directly contradicted the view of German history that the SED was promoting. Wilhelm Girnus, one of Eisler's critics in the Academy of Arts, said during the debates "in how far and why has Goethe's Faust become this epoch defining figure? Precisely because it artistically embodies the progressive strengths of the German people in great depth for the conditions of the period. If one invalidates that, then one invalidates all of German history" (in Bunge 71). Eisler's Faust is, as Ernst Fischer claimed in the East German literary journal *Sinn und Form*, "a central figure of the German Misery Thesis" (in Bunge 27). Fischer, writing in 1952, shortly after the libretto's publication, meant it as praise, but the German Misery Thesis had already been established as taboo, and Fischer's praise emerged as a condemnation by Eisler's critics in the course of the debates.

Partly responding to Fischer's praise, Hans Richter attacked Eisler over the issue of historical representation, specifically the dramatization of the German Misery Thesis. In an article in the literary journal *Neue deutsche Literatur*, Richter stated that "the question of whether this production [of a historical figure embodying the German Misery Thesis] is in accord with the demand for a new German historiography must probably be answered negatively" (in Bunge 41). Richter accused Eisler explicitly of contradicting the official efforts to understand German history in a new light. The "demand for a new German historiography" that Richter speaks of is a direct reference to the effort to reinterpret history to support the SED's self-legitimizing project of "anti-fascist democratic renewal."

The accusation that Eisler dramatized the German Misery Thesis became one of the central charges during the debates held in the Academy of Arts. Alexander Abusch concluded his opening presentation in the Academy of Arts on May 13, 1953 by stating that "[a] Faust opera can only become a *German national opera* when it portrays Faust as the *spiritual historic figure of the passionate battle against the German Misery and at the same time represents an all around recognition of the world*" (in Bunge 61). In defending himself against the allegations against his portrayal of German history, Hanns Eisler stated during the meeting in the Academy of Arts on May 27, 1953, "What is the moral of Faustus: he who sets himself against his people, against the movement of his people, against the revolution, betrays them, makes a deal with the rulers, is taken by the devil. He is justly destroyed" (in Bunge 140). Eisler believed that he had represented history in a genuine fashion without violating socialist ideology, and indeed felt that the issue of the "German Misery" was as real and current as ever. In his notes in preparation for his defense of his libretto, published in his collected writings, Eisler wrote:

Believing in the victory of progress and of the nation, in the period of socialism, of the power of the Soviet Union historically secure, of which there cannot be the slightest doubt, does not mean having to deny the misery of German history. No, it is absolutely necessary, especially today, where Germany stands a crossroads, to show those factors, those historic weaknesses, which led to this misery, in order to warn (286).

This view, however, had already been soundly rejected by the party. For Abusch and the others in the anti-Eisler camp, it was not sufficient that he who betrays the working classes recognizes his sins and is punished, because it is ulti-

mately Eisler's perceived condemnation of German history the SED leadership wished to contradict. As Girnus stated in the course of the debates:

Eisler condemns in this [Faust] Figure the entire history of the German spirit: there is nothing progressive in the history of the German spirit, and the tiny bit that there is—so says Fischer—is but an exception.... I pose the question: is that truly typical for Germany, that the great German humanists were—and I count amongst these humanists, as the greatest humanists of the German people for instance Marx and Engels..., traitors of the German people, traitors of the German spirit, traitors of humanistic ideals? (in Bunge 67)

Girnus, like Abusch before him, then proceeds to claim that the downfall of the Third Reich was itself a victory for German humanism. Given the historical context, Girnus' accusation is a very serious one. Not only does he accuse Eisler of questioning the legitimacy of the SED by challenging the notion that there is a progressive tradition the SED can appropriate, but he also accuses Eisler of attacking Marx and Engels, thereby attacking the core of communist ideology.

### Eisler's Alleged Attack on Goethe's *Faust*

Eisler's characterization of the course of German history through the figure of Faust was only one area in which Eisler's attackers perceived a threat to the SED's project of "anti-fascist democratic renewal." The second main criticism was not just his depiction of history in general, but his alleged failure to build upon the classical heritage, the other major component of the SED's campaign to build ideological support for itself in post-war Germany.

First, Eisler was criticized for his decision to use an older version of the Faust legend as a model for his libretto. In his essay in the journal *Neue Deutsche Literatur* Hans Richter posed an argument based on Lukács' theories that the Faust legend itself stemmed from sixteenth century Lutherans who looked down upon the striving spirit embodied by Faust. According to Lukács and Richter, the earliest versions of the tale, in which Faust commits sin and is then dragged into hell, were created by Lutherans who did not consider "Faustian ambition" as something to be valued. In Goethe's version, on the other hand, Faust's striving spirit did not result in Faust's damnation, but rather in his salvation (Lukács 176). Richter claims that "the succession

of Marlowe – Lessing – Goethe is the line of the artistic purification and development of the myth from this point of view. Every serious, historically concrete telling of *Faust* must stand in this succession" (in Bunge 40). According to Richter, to base a newer version of the Faust story upon one that predates Goethe, as Eisler does, only serves to weaken this purification of the story and to draw one back to those versions in which the ambitiously striving human spirit represented by Faust is equated with sin.

Alexander Abusch took this line of attack even farther. On May 13, 1953, *Johann Faustus* was the theme of that week's Wednesday Circle (*Mittwochsgesellschaft*) in the Academy of Arts. The meeting opened with Alexander Abusch reading his paper "Faust—Hero or Renegade of German National Literature?" in which he laid out many of the main arguments against Eisler's work. Abusch picks up on Fischer's claim that the *Johann Faustus* libretto could become the next great German national opera and argues that this cannot be the case when the libretto does not model itself on that defining work of the classical heritage, Goethe's *Faust*. Abusch states:

The greatness of Goethe's poetry and its immovable place in the literature of our nation makes the creation of a German national opera with the title *Johann Faustus* impossible without beginning with Goethe....The return to earlier, primitive forms, such as the puppet play or even Goethe's *Urfaust*, can never allow for a superior development over Goethe's accomplishments. (in Bunge 60-61)

According to this view, Eisler's first mistake lay in his choice not to build upon the Faust legend as it came to him, but rather to go backwards. Abusch invokes here the greatness of Goethe's work as the model of what a national opera based upon the legend of Faust should be. An ideal operatic version of Faust would serve the purpose of assisting in the goal of appropriating the literature understood as being a part of the classical heritage, forming it into a version that could serve the needs of the state while remaining true to the characteristics of Goethe's text that were considered admirable according to the accepted GDR interpretation of *Faust*. Neglecting, or even abusing the classical heritage, on the other hand, was a serious charge, given the important function that the classical heritage had in the SED's greater anti-fascist program. During the May 13 meeting in the Academy of Arts, Arnold Zweig even half jokingly suggested that Eisler could have avoided trouble had he named his protagonist "Knaust" rather than "Faust" (in Bunge 69). In failing to base his version of *Faust* upon Goethe's great

work, Eisler had already failed in fulfilling the task assigned to the artist by the project of “antifascist-democratic renewal,” and thus failed to present an opera that could be useful in solidifying the SED’s power.

Yet the threat Eisler appeared to pose to the project of “antifascist-democratic renewal” was not simply through his ignoring the classical heritage, but rather by his allegedly mocking and debasing it. In the course of the discussion in the Academy of Arts on May 13, Wilhelm Girnus mentions the scene at the end of Act II of Eisler’s *Johann Faustus* in which Hanswurst, a mechanical character whose primary concern throughout the story is his empty stomach, is forced to part from Grete in Atlanta because the Lord of Atlanta has discovered Faust’s anti-aristocratic sympathies (Eisler 60). Girnus asserts that this scene functions as a parody of the dungeon scene at the end of the first part of Goethe’s *Faust*, where, according to Girnus, the desperation of the simple individual is expressed (Bunge 69). Eisler answered that Hanswurst is simply a comical figure, and that the scene is not to be taken as a parody. The scene does, however, appear to be a quotation of the dungeon scene, in which Gretchen, whose relationship to Faust has resulted in the deaths of her mother, brother, and illegitimately conceived child, faces execution. Faust attempts to rescue her and take her away, but she resists, while a heavenly voice announces that she is saved (4404-4616). In Eisler’s libretto, Faust, Mephistopheles, and Faust’s servant Hanswurst travel to Atlanta. Setting the scene in the American south, Eisler brings onto the stage the area’s history of slave exploitation, and represents America as a place where capitalism has created a tenuous paradise for the upper classes. With Faust’s flight from Atlanta, Hanswurst and Grete are also forced to part, after which the agents of the Lord of Atlanta descend upon Grete. When Hanswurst recovers her veil, it is implied that something terrible has befallen Grete (Eisler 67). While Eisler does include a certain amount of humor in the libretto as a whole, the Hanswurst-Grete subplot itself is one of the most disturbing. Their simple love story is intruded upon by the Lord of Atlanta’s oppressive agents. While Gretchen in Goethe’s work becomes a casualty of Mephistopheles’ nefarious influence, Grete in Eisler’s *Johann Faustus* is a casualty of capitalist tyranny. As for Hanswurst, his character develops significantly in the course of the libretto, until he ultimately turns his back on *Johann Faustus*, showing that he is more than an amusing stock character. Given this, it is difficult to see how Girnus could claim that Eisler was parodying Goethe’s *Faust*. This perceived lack of veneration for the classical heritage added to the serious charges made against Eisler’s handling of one of the great works of German classicism. And, given the

important role that the classical heritage played in the SED’s search for legitimizing roots, the accusation of mocking the classical heritage would, by extension, be an accusation of endangering a critical element of the project of establishing the GDR.

It was Max Schröder from Aufbau, the publisher of the libretto, who most accurately summed up the perceived problem with *Johann Faustus* in light of the classical heritage. Schröder spoke at the meeting in the Academy of Arts during the third and final discussion of Hanns Eisler’s libretto. Schröder announced that he considered the approval to publish the libretto a “mistake” (in Bunge 231), and then presented six theses, the third of which read:

[*Johann Faustus*] conveys a false appraisal of the national heritage, that appears both in the portrayal of the Renaissance movement itself as well as in reference to Goethe’s *Faust* and the period of imperialism. It denies the positive role of the classical in German national culture and therefore leads to false conclusions of the strengths of the German people in the present. (in Bunge 232)

Schröder’s point makes clear exactly why a “false appraisal” of the classical heritage is a serious matter. The classical heritage is not regarded in this view as a phenomenon that is somehow not connected to the people; rather it is a reflection of the strength of all Germans. By ostensibly misusing a figure from the classical heritage Eisler is not only distorting the great works of the German literary tradition to which the SED is trying to connect itself, but also insulting the German people. Once again Eisler’s critics employed a line of reasoning that tries to equate Eisler’s attempt at a confrontation with the problems of German history to an attack on the classical heritage, and therefore an offense against ordinary Germans. While this and other arguments put forth by Eisler’s critics may sound absurd in their ideological absolutism, they do betray what Eisler’s critics perceived as the threat the *Johann Faustus* libretto posed. This “false appraisal” of history and heritage was interpreted as a problematization of both at a time when the SED was attempting to cast them in a positive light in order to make them a part of the legitimizing anti-fascist mythology. In the minds of Eisler’s critics, this libretto posed a serious threat to the ideological reshaping of Germany.

## Conclusion

Although Eisler had his defenders at these meetings in the Academy of Arts, the reigning consensus regarded

*Johann Faustus* as an iconic product of the German Misery Thesis. Following the final discussion of *Johann Faustus* in the Academy of Arts, Hanns Eisler took up residence in Vienna, not to finally settle in East Berlin until the year 1955 (Betz 201). The debate over the libretto cast a shadow over the remainder of his career. On October 30, 1953 Eisler wrote an apologetic letter to the Central Committee of the SED in which he acknowledged that he had made mistakes and expressed the effect that the debate had had on him, while still hoping to return into the fold in East Germany. “After the Faustus attack I found that every impulse to write music had left me completely. I have no hope of ever finding the impulse to write music, which is of such vital importance to me, anywhere other than in the German Democratic Republic” (in Bunge 263).

*Johann Faustus* was to have been a confrontation with the difficulties of German history, but the SED ultimately regarded Eisler’s representation of history and his relationship to the canon of literature the party wished to appropriate as being antithetical to their attempts to legitimize their power. As illustrated by the debate in the Academy of Arts, this confrontation clashed with SED attempts to find and annex elements of German history and culture that would be useful in the self-legitimizing project of anti-fascist democratic renewal. Through his representation of history and his relationship to the classical heritage, Eisler created a work that, while enshrining traditional Marxist values, was viewed as incompatible with the SED’s goal of finding legitimizing historical and cultural roots, and was thus demonized as being highly counter-ideological. Behind such accusations as mocking the classical heritage, or dramatizing the German Misery Thesis, stood the more serious accusation of endangering the program of “anti-fascist democratic renewal,” and thus endangering the SED’s efforts to firmly establish power in the face of a problematic history and in competition with a diametrically opposed ideology enshrined in West Germany.

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