



WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

Clemens Hellsberg

IN MEMORY OF GEORG STRAKA

"I am greatly saddened by the news of Georg Straka's death. I wish to express my greatest sympathy to his family and to all members of the Vienna Philharmonic. May the soul of Georg Straka rest in peace." With letters of similar wording, the sending of flowers and official delegations, numerous Japanese music-lovers and institutions, such as Suntory Ltd, led by President Nobutada Saji and his wife Hideko; Suntory Hall (represented by Director Takeshi Hara and Senior Advisor Yoshinori Iida); and Co-Sponsor Daiwa House (represented by CEO Takeo Higuchi, President Kenji Murakami and Director Makoto Yamamoto); extended their commiseration. The love which is being manifested for the departed and extended to his relatives and to our orchestra in one of the most tragic moments of its history is deeply touching, because it precisely embodies the inner bond between people, which can only be forged through music.



Georg Straka in the Orchestra

Georg Straka was born on February 14, 1969, in Mödling and received a thoroughly versatile musical education. At the age of six he began to learn piano and violin under the tutelage of his father, Anton Straka, who was a member of our first violin section from 1964 to 2004. Starting at age ten, he continued his piano study with Creszanzia Wunderer at the music school in Mödling. In 1984 he began to study contrabass with Brigitte Hampel-Proksch at the Josef Matthias Hauer Conservatory in Wiener Neustadt. A year later he changed to Johannes Auersperger at the Oberschützen campus of the University of Graz for Music and Performing Arts, but continued his study of the violin under Florian Zwiauer at the Vienna Conservatory until 1987. In that year he graduated from the music high school in Wiener Neustadt and thereafter focused his attention on the contrabass. He took lessons from Alois Posch from 1994 to 1997, otherwise being a member of the class led by Johannes Auersperger, in which he passed the diploma examination in 2001.

By this time Georg Straka, who was a prize winner at the 1993 International Contrabass Competition of Markneukirchen, was already a well-established musician. After receiving an engagement at the Salzburg Mozarteum Orchestra in 1991, he became a member of the Vienna State Opera Orchestra in 1996, following a successful audition, and was accepted into the Association of the Vienna Philharmonic on November 24, 1999. The exceptional diligence with which Georg Straka pursued his education alongside his professional activities was also recognized in other circles. While passing the diploma examination with distinction he received the Recognition Award of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and, in November 2001, he was awarded the Dr.-Karl-Böhm Scholarship, endowed by the city of Graz.

In addition to the orchestra, Georg Straka, who had also completed a three year course of study in music theory under Heinrich Gattermeyer, dedicated himself to chamber music. He played in the Straka Ensemble and in 1991 became a member of the first Austrian contrabass quartet "Circus Bassissumus", which consisted of students of Johannes Auersperger and performed in many European countries, and for which he wrote numerous arrangements. Along with Rick Heis (Vocals and Guitar) and Michael Rot (Piano) he formed the "Rick Heis Trio" which released the compact disc "Caught in Paradise" in 2009. It goes without saying that from 2006 he participated in the

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"Familienmusik Straka", made up of 11 members spanning three generations, with which he gave numerous benefit concerts for diverse charitable institutions, thus uniting the two most important aspects of his life – family and music.

His third great passion was for the mountains, especially Mount Fuji. He climbed this peak for the first time on November 3, 2000, and returned again and again over the years – for the fifteenth time on November 3, 2010. Our violinmaker Wilfried Ramsaier-Gorbach, who accompanied him on his last tour, was an eyewitness of the accident, along with the Japanese mountaineers Kei Sakamoto and Hiroshi Takagi. All three stayed with Georg Straka until his body was retrieved with the aid of a bulldozer in the evening hours by Chihary Yoneyama,



Familienmusik Straka

, the owner of the mountain cabin on the fifth station of Mount Fuji; and until the police were finished with their investigation. Hiroshi Takagi, a very experienced mountaineer, who also does mountain excursions in the Himalayas and in Alaska, wrote a detailed report, which on the one hand gives a dramatic account of what transpired, but on the other hand expresses his great sympathy for the deceased mountaineering comrade. "By way of the press reports, I found out that Mr. Straka was only 41 years old, and a wonderful contrabassist for the Vienna Philharmonic. I lament him greatly. I assume he lost his balance [...] by a gust of wind. I saw him hit against rocks which loomed out of the snow. I was at least 50 meters away as he was thrown past me, far too rapidly for me to reach him. [...] When I think of his family, my heart weighs heavily. I wrote a letter to his family in English, hoping that it might be a small consolation at this tragic time."

On the morning of November 4th, before performing a public rehearsal, the Vienna Philharmonic played the funeral march from Beethoven's "Eroica". Georges Prêtre conducted, and Andris Nelsons as well as Zubin and Nancy Mehta were in attendance at this moving commemoration. That evening's concert began with the "Air" by Johann Sebastian Bach, which was preceded by a touching gesture: Seiji Ozawa called on the evening of November 3rd to express his condolences and his desire to come to Suntory Hall to conduct the "Air", even though he was still greatly weakened by his illness. In the end this was not possible, however, due to a therapy session in Osaka which could not be re-scheduled. None-the-less, the willingness of the former music director of the Vienna State Opera and present Honorary Member of the Vienna Philharmonic demonstrates his bond with our orchestra in a telling manner.

By invitation from Suntory Hall and the Vienna Philharmonic, Hiroshi Takagi attended the last concert of this year's tour of Japan on November 10th, as well as the closing event which followed. The first part was dedicated to Georg Straka, with Ernst Ottensamer, Daniel Froschauer, Harald Krumpöck, Elmar Landerer and Fritz Dolezal performing the Larghetto from Mozart's Clarinet Quintet in A major, KV 581. The honorary guest followed the concert with great sympathy: Hiroshi Takagi himself is an amateur contrabassist ...

The death of Georg Straka is the most shocking accident among the membership of our orchestra since July 29, 1992, when the unforgettable Gerhart Hetzel fell from a rocky cliff during the Salzburg Festival. On tours, the Vienna Philharmonic has long been spared accidents of such a dimension;

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however there was another tragedy on the South America tour in 1923, at which time the orchestra lost three of its members. On August 6, 1923, the 38-year-old first violinist Karl Knoll, who suffered from depression, committed suicide. On August 22nd, the clarinetist Franz Behrends died at the age of 60 from pneumonia, and on September 15th, during the return journey on the "Köln", the principal bassist Eduard Madenski, who was a virtuoso of his instrument and whose pedagogical materials are still in use today, died from a contagious disease which raged among passengers on the ship. Searching deeper in the records, one finds yet another mountaineering accident: On July 30, 1902, Viktor Christ, a 33-year-old trumpet player and excellent musician who had earned the trust of the then Court Opera Director Gustav Mahler, had a deadly accident during a mountain tour.



Georg Straka as Mountaineer

Before his accident on Mount Fuji, fate had previously dealt another devastating blow to Georg Straka and his family. In 2004 he was diagnosed with a brain tumour which, however, was successfully removed. After this experience he continued his work as a contrabassist in our orchestra with the same diligence which was so characteristic of his entire life, and, as a section leader who was responsible for the scheduling of his section, he not only contributed greatly to the orchestra's self-management, but time after time, with a calm consistency he posed questions regarding planning details and repeatedly introduced constructive ideas for changes and solutions. He leaves behind his wife Birgit, with whom he had been married since 1992, and his children Lukas (18), Lena (16), Linda (10) and Luise (6).

Our deepest sympathies go out to them as well as his parents, his brother and all his other relatives. Along with them, we mourn a man who maintained his compassion for music and the Vienna Philharmonic in everyday life as well as in the hard times which he had to endure. Georg Straka was joined to us through "the bond of art, which", as Gustav Mahler expressed it, "unites all of those called, regardless of reputation or position", when he wrote to the Vienna Philharmonic in 1906. He will always remain connected to our association, for which his contribution has now come to an end.