



WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

Clemens Hellsberg

Acceptance Speech for the Marietta and Friedrich Torberg Medal

Most Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

I find it nearly impossible to verbalize what I feel at this moment. The significance of this award lies less in the affirmation which the bestowal of any award expresses, but rather, in the clarity it has shown me about a path which, I must admit, I cannot truly claim to be meritorious, as I travelled it for long periods of time unknowingly.



The last concerts of the Vienna Philharmonic before the demise of the First Republic of Austria took place on February 19th and 20th, 1938, with Bruno Walter conducting the world premiere of Egon Wellesz' "Prosperos Beschwörungen - Five Symphonic Pieces" and Anton Bruckner's Fourth Symphony. On February 23 and 24th, 1985, the program of those concerts was repeated under the baton of Bernhard Haitink, and it was at that time that I began to grasp the significance of Bruno Walter, the former conductor of the Vienna Court Opera in whose honor we hold this event this evening here in the "House on the Ring". I am indebted to my predecessor, Alfred Altenburger, for not striving for some kind of spectacular gesture with the afore-mentioned program, but simply for commemorating the 100th birthday of Egon Wellesz, while at the same time calling attention to the shining light of Bruno Walter, whose importance extended much further than our orchestra.

In 1989 I suggested writing a book about the history of the Vienna Philharmonic in anticipation of the orchestra's 150th anniversary in 1992, and sought the orchestra's approval of the project by way of the administrative committee. With youthful audacity I insisted on two conditions: that no one would be allowed to read any sections of the book before publication, as I would accept no censorship; and that I would write about 150 years of history and not 143 years of history. The unanimous acceptance of these conditions was not in and of itself a spectacular gesture, but I am deeply grateful for the moral development of our orchestra, vigorously encouraged by my predecessors Chairman Werner Resel and Business Manager Walter Bloovsky, which paved the way for this acceptance. This gratitude assists me until this day in overcoming various adversities.

In 2000, upon the suggestion of our long-term concert subscriber and friend, Christian Limbeck-Lilienau, and with the aid of the unforgotten Leon Zelman, we performed Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in the quarry of the former concentration camp in Mauthausen. This event was more spectacular, but it certainly was not a mere gesture. It is painful to perform in hell a composition which since its very first performance has conveyed the intimation of sublimity; it is painful to realize that Mauthausen, just as Beethoven's Ninth, was created by human hands. Yet, I am deeply grateful that the impressions of those who were humiliated, tortured and murdered were brought before me in a manner which changed my life and the way I view the world.

It is, however, not just these events which have shaped the afore-mentioned path, but there have also been so many individuals with whom I have been privileged to work. The first of these



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to name is Business Manager Dr. Dieter Flury, but there have also been the members of the Philharmonic's administrative committee, many of whom are taking part in this ceremony today. There are Director Dominique Meyer and General Music Director Franz Welser-Möst, who while striving to attain the highest artistic standards, never forget the individual; there are the many great artists who have enriched my life and the lives of my family through their outstanding ability and friendship. There is Zubin Mehta, who carries the spirit of Bruno Walter into the present day, for which he is revered around the world, and whom I cannot thank enough for coming here this evening after three rehearsals in order to hold the laudation. There are also, and now I come around to the Jewish Community in Vienna, my friends Peter Poltun and Monika Poltun-Sternberg, who provide a moral anchor and with whom I have so much in common.

Dear President Deutsch, Dear Erika Jakubovits, Most Honorable Committee Members of the Jewish Community of Vienna: When you base this bestowal of the Marietta and Friedrich Torberg Medal upon the "initiative in dealing with the NS past of your institution and the resolute manner in which you have addressed these issues at events, symposiums and lectures"; and when the Jewish Community presents an award for the first time to a member of the Vienna Philharmonic, I truly do not know how to thank you. You dedicate this medal "to the memory of the distinguished writer, humanist and combative spirit Friedrich Torberg, who was always on the front lines in the fight against Nazism, Communism and all totalitarian ideologies". I must say, you yourselves have also displayed a good amount of "combative spirit", as it was to be anticipated that the presentation of this award would not be welcomed in all quarters.

You have also recognized that we attempt to accomplish more than merely performing at the highest artistic level. There is a famous statement of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: "The word coincidence is blasphemy. There is no such thing as coincidence". I learned of this from Peter Marboe, another stalwart trailblazer, who at this time is celebrating his 70th birthday. It is no coincidence that you are also honoring Rector Wolfgang Schütz, as you note the fact that both institutions, the Vienna Philharmonic and the Medical University of Vienna, "are involved in social and scientific projects in the area of cancer research, which is a further example of their exercise of humanitarian responsibilities."

Still, how can I thank you? Shall I thank you primarily because by honoring me you also honor an institution which has been, and still is, attacked because of its past? Shall I thank you that with this award you acknowledge the long journey from 47% membership in the NSDAP to a 100% commitment to write 150 years of history? You have acknowledged our efforts on behalf of the truth in a very generous manner, and for this I am grateful. The presentation of this award brings with it the obligation to continue to place the truth in the service of humanism. Those of you who two months ago celebrated my 60th birthday will please excuse me when I repeat myself: The older I get, the more important become to me the values exemplified in the life of my grandfather. He was a simple miller in the "Mühlviertel", yet was characterized by a moral integrity which to this day, even 49 years after his death, burns like a beacon in my soul. He was the gentlest man whom I ever met, but when he regarded something to be unjust it was a definitive verdict. I thank you that with the bestowal of the Marietta and Friedrich Torberg Medal you compel me to continue to subject myself to such judgment, constantly demanding accountability from myself.

In a public discussion I once confronted Pierre Boulez with the question: "Bruno Kreisky once said that it was the revenge of history upon young revolutionaries that later in life, dressed in tails and wearing medals, they attend the opera ball. What does the Pierre Boulez of 1955 have



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to say to the Pierre Boulez of 2005, as Honorary Member of the Vienna Philharmonic? He laughed and exclaimed, "The surprise of my life!" Ladies and Gentleman of the Committee of the Jewish Community in Vienna, you have presented me with the surprise of my life! And now I find myself in a quandary: I just made a commitment to keep working, to keep fighting. On the other hand, I consider this medal to be a highpoint of my life, and as wonderful as it is on the summit - it is lonely up here and the only way ahead seems to be downhill. The temptation is great to exclaim, along with Goethe's Dr. Faust: "Stay a while, thou art so fair!" But then what?

"The clock stands still, a midnight hush, the clock-hand falls. It falls and time is done for me!" "Dilige et quod vis fac" - "Love, and do what you will!" is one of the most well-known sayings of St. Augustine. Within this context, the search for truth never reaches the summit, as long as it is bounded by love. And in this spirit, I thank you, ladies and gentlemen of the Jewish Community, for that which, after love, is the greatest gift we can present to one another - for your trust!