

DER TAGESSPIEGEL



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Spectrum Concerts Berlin has been an enigma to many who have watched it grow over 15 years. It has unusual aspects: a stranger coming to an isolated, changing city; coming initially with no means of support; starting a musical project at a high level of quality without grants or subsidies (or “angels” or “trust funds”); and making at the same time an odd, unofficial communications effort through American chamber music, sounding unheard-of notes into the soon-to-be-restored capital of the homeland of music. One sees a person in transition coming to a city in transition, its dissolving providing the soil for the newcomer’s deep, still-forming resolution.

It seems to this culture critic – and friend – that the plan of Frank Dodge was instinctively large, a sense that nations, peoples, must speak together with renewed intimacy and truthfulness, beyond what any negotiating committee can approve. Yet his techniques remain musical – interweaving themes and counterpoint – even when the intention extends beyond music into culture at large. His insight is that “culture” is crying out to break out of niches, whether the large official niche in Germany or the small, private niche in America, and make for itself new and free connections.

America’s world power makes new connections urgent. Only a hundred years ago, many Americans came to Germany to learn musical culture, and the large ethnically-German population of the USA was known for its passion for music, especially singing and playing together at home. Today my country exports culture – or cultural products – by the megaton, largely indifferent to the content as long as a profit is made. Works of real art are being made in America, but here, too, the official support has diminished. As George Soros noted last year, since 1989 the idealism of America has lost its place on our national agenda, and “geopolitical realism” has taken complete control of our political institutions. With no contrasting social and economic ideal (however falsely implemented in Soviet Russia), American export culture is an artifact of economic power, displaying the degraded values that seem always to accompany unrestrained power. There is no longer any perceived need to share culture of greater intimacy, subtlety and inner significance. Fine popular music is made in America, and occasional fine films, but these seem to float on a river of exploitative wreckage: superficial, violent, crudely seductive. And the ranking of importance is now always given in dollars.

Americans don't see the distressing character of our cultural exports, however, because there are balancing factors at home. An intensity of social commitment – spread, it is true, over a great variety of specific concerns – involves tens of millions of people and has shown itself able to assert more far-sighted and humane values. The creation of a non-commercial broadcasting system in the 70s and 80s was one of the victories of this other, humane America, as is the slow but definite progress for human rights, the battle to heal the environment, the effort to awaken to the planetary consciousness. A certain fine edge of this vast “coalition of conscience” is reflected in music such as that of Robert Helps, whose “Nocturne” walks the path of a late Van Gogh self-portrait. And speaking for the listeners, Help's contemporary, the poet Adrienne Rich, has written, “That is why the jazz and classical music stations play / to give a ground of meaning to our pain?”

Revealed in Berlin by Spectrum Concerts over the last fifteen years, in its regular season and in American Music Weeks, such works have been able to make conversation in the souls of Berliners with the intimate musical meditations of central and sometimes eastern Europe. Like a homeopathic dosage, this drop can perhaps freshen the ground-water of a whole region. And it is, in a way, a gesture of return: the awkward American music students of 1890 are speaking back, generations later, through Copland, Harbison, Helps and others, to a Germany that has meanwhile lost its cultural confidence.

Today's world calls out for a great conversation, in which the earnestness of American idealism, musical and otherwise, must be met by renewed voices from Europe and beyond. Europe and North America together are only a well-provisioned fraction of humanity. We live now on a planet unified in consciousness; humanity itself is waking to a singular identity, hovering over the billions of single, self-conscious entities. “Bildung” – the profound notion that self-cultivation of the individual is the essential purpose of life – needs to be part of the emerging global idea of human being. It must balance the obsessive competition which the Anglo-Americans have communicated to the world. *Bildung*, in American terms, is “*how* you play the game.” On that ladder of questioning, which reaches down to the dead object and up to the evolving human being, Americans, individualist by nature, have a gift for that “how” which leads down to “what.” How you win, since “winning is everything.” Germans are very good at that, too, but have also a tradition of the “how” that turns up toward the “why” and the “who,” attaining a lasting greatness of soul that works within the network of human relationships.

How does one compete in chamber music? Not by being a soloist, deaf to the others. The “winner” in group creative artistry is the one who listens best to others, who meets and supports and draws out the special gifts of the others. (We don't need to call this multilateralism.) And what is the “product” here – that fades as it is sounded, yet echoes indefinitely in the head and heart of the one who really listened? There is a tremendous “what,” in the rare, delicate instruments, and “how,” in the bows and strings and keys and forms, but the exaltation of “who” and “why” that is achieved, say, in Schubert's C-major quintet, or Helps' “Shall We Dance,” is something super-natural – though Goethe might say that it is the further realization of nature.

By general standards it is perhaps a bit crazy today that we should take newspaper space to talk about these things. It is hard to believe that it is truly relevant. What, after all, is happening in Iraq? Or on Wall Street? Or with AIDS in Africa, and the ocean of suffering of the very poor? Yet there are simple, strong things for which we must not lose our feeling. The capacity, for instance, to take in deeply the consciousness of another human being, to give it space in our thought and feeling. Is this not a prerequisite to becoming truly social?

We cannot run away from each other any more, nor can we fight. We seem ready to turn ourselves into social machine-parts, to avoid the stress and pain of being human, but examined in any seriousness that reveals itself as suicide. Music and culture generally have an immeasurable responsibility in the world today, between individuals, among cultures. This responsibility is to renew and strengthen the human soul, the soul of humanity, so that we may evolve to meet each other on a higher level of existence, as the times demand.

No nation can express more than a part of what the human potential is, and what takes place in a region long known as a “middle” is especially crucial. The failure of this middle to “play its part” means that the notes sounded all around cannot be harmonized, cannot be brought into an organic, living relationship. And whether or not there is government support, or generosity of individuals and business groups, it is required that certain individuals make real sacrifices in giving birth to fresh and timely experiences.

Perhaps this summarizes the accomplishment of Spectrum Concerts Berlin, that it is adding a few true and needed notes into this middle of the world’s cultural conversation. Whatever our place and our work and our gifts, all of us might try to understand this remarkable moment in time and do the same.