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Essay to present the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize to Christoph Eschenbach
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Music is a form of expression that people all over the world understand. And almost everywhere in the world people love European music. The music of Europe constitutes a single one-of-a-kind continuum, it doesn't require the complex, nationally determined medium of language. For this reason, it enables musicians and listeners alike to forget the conflicts of their inheritance and of their day-to-day lives.

My love for music was encouraged early on, when I was in school. It is probably for this reason that I, in the course of my career as a politician and a private individual, valued the opportunity to encounter members of the international music community. Many left a lasting impression on me. I'd like to mention Herbert von Karajan, a brilliant artist with whom one could discuss God and the world. Or Leonard Bernstein, who was a music educator as much as he was a musician. Or Yehudi Menuhin, who was both a musician and a model of morals. Or the incredibly vital Kurt Masur, a wonderful Kapellmeister as well as an imposing figure, also in the political sphere. Or the wonderful conductor Daniel Barenboim, who brings musicians from conflicting societies together and gives them a forum to make music together. Or Kent Nagano, who will be coming to Hamburg in 2016. The list could go on and on.

Among these ranks of internationally acclaimed musicians and conductors I'd certainly also count Christoph Eschenbach. He has a first-class reputation as a pianist and is simultaneously celebrated and acknowledged as a first-class conductor. Wherever I travel in the world I run across the name Christoph Eschenbach, because people have been in his concerts and remember them with great enthusiasm. Eschenbach is active beyond the borders of Germany as well as Europe. I myself have heard many very moving concerts, from his hands as a pianist or from his baton as a conductor. I will never forget how Loki and I, during a concert at the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival in Lübeck's Marienkirche or the Cathedral, had our first meaningful insight about the music of Mahler thanks to Christoph Eschenbach and his orchestra. To this day I am grateful to him for that experience.

Christoph Eschenbach was born in Breslau in 1940. He lost his parents and his grandmother whilst very young, an experience that traumatised him and rendered him mute. He was adopted by a cousin of his mother, who like his parents was a musician. In her home he once again became acquainted with the music he'd been familiar with as a child. She let him learn the piano, and through this he found his voice again. Eschenbach put it the following way: „Her home was like a rebirth. She taught piano. I heard her in the evening when she played just for herself. I listened, listened, listened. That was probably also a healing agent for me.“

The piano lessons brought more than just healing. The protagonist revealed an immense talent and already attained his first prize at the age of ten at a competition for young pianists in Hamburg. After completing high school in 1959 he also completed his music studies in 1963, with distinction. Soon he was one of the most sought-after pianists and played regularly in Salzburg, where he

collaborated with Herbert von Karajan. In 1969 he gave his American debut with the Cleveland Orchestra under Georg Szell. He loved the music of the German romantics, but also of Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Bartók. Eschenbach once said that Vladimir Horowitz was his greatest role model. He must have been all the more pleased, then, when this idol of his also bestowed words of praise upon the pianist Eschenbach. He became one of the most sought-after pianists of his generation.

After a tremendously successful career as a pianist he began, in the early 1970's, to concentrate more and more on conducting. As early as 1967 he was getting conducting lessons from Georg Szell on the side. When asked why he had given up his solo career as a pianist, he once replied: „I find this act of communicating with myself – alone with the work – uninteresting. I'm not a one-man band. That chapter is over.“

Eschenbach gave his debut in 1972 with music of Anton Bruckner, and quickly found success. As a guest conductor he is active to this day with countless orchestras. Among others I'll mention the Berlin Philharmonic, the London Symphony Orchestra, the Symphony Orchestras of Boston, Chicago, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Toronto, Montreal; as well as the Cleveland Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the Vienna Philharmonic. In 2013 the Frankfurter Allgemeine wrote: „It would be easier to list the great orchestras of the world that Christoph Eschenbach has NOT yet conducted.“

After the first chief conductor position in Ludwigshafen he was recruited to become the artistic and musical director of the Tonhalle Orchestra in Zurich. Thereupon he went to Houston, Texas, to act as chief conductor of the Houston Symphony Orchestra from 1988 to 1999, which during that time became one of the world's finest orchestras. I had the great pleasure of bumping into him during one of my lecture tours in a Texas hotel, and enjoyed the pleasure of spending time with this friend of mine from Germany.

In 1998/1999 Eschenbach took over as chief conductor of the North German Radio Symphony Orchestra (NDR) in Hamburg, and from 2000 he was the musical director of the Orchestre de Paris for several years. Here, he led his first complete production of Wagner's Ring of the Nibelungen. In 2003 there followed five years as music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra. In 2010/2011 Eschenbach took over the artistic directorship of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington. I also don't want to fail to mention that Eschenbach still occasionally makes appearances as an accompanist in song recitals.

Eschenbach describes himself as a merciless perfectionist. He belongs to the first generation of conductors who no longer regarded themselves as dictators at the podium, but rather approached the Orchestra as an equal partner. In Eschenbach's eyes this is one of the reasons that orchestras have become so much better over the years. Another reason why orchestras perform so well under his baton was identified by the Frankfurter Rundschau in 1997: „Eschenbach's conducting showed an incomparable degree of presence. Without micro-managing the musicians, he closely monitored every facet of the performance.“

In the 1960's I was a regular guest in the home of a Hamburg friend and the later president of the Federal Bank Karl Klasen, who together with his wife maintained an open home. Frequently, guests from the music or theater world made an appearance here as well. One time a piano duo performed for the assembled guests; it was the two colleague-pianists Justus Frantz and Christoph Eschenbach. It was on this evening that a friendship with Christoph Eschenbach began which has now spanned several decades.

Early in 1981, when I was still chancellor, Justus Frantz and Christoph Eschenbach invited me to record an album with them. We began with Mozart's Concerto for Three Pianos. Mozart had written the F major Concerto for Three Pianos and Orchestra, KV 242, for two pianists and one young piano player. I may not have been young, but certainly my skills at the keyboard were appropriately limited. What most caught me off-guard was the tempo which Eschenbach chose to conduct from his piano. I was technically only able to hold myself to his tempo with great effort, but despite these challenges I had great fun with the collective music making, especially as our accompaniment was provided by the London Symphony Orchestra. Naturally we practiced for several hours in Hamburg before stepping into the studios at Abbey Road. Four years later, in 1985, we met up again, Gerhard Opitz joined us, and we recorded Johann Sebastian Bach's Concerto for Four Pianos.

In the 1980's I began to plan regular working vacations in the wintertime. By then Frantz and Eschenbach were managing the Casa de los Musicos on Gran Canaria, in which there was not only a writing desk but also a grand piano. This became the ideal vacation destination for me. The house was some distance away from the hubbub of the beach, had sparse furnishings in the Spanish style, and thus made it possible for me to focus on what was relevant. In this house I wrote many books, and was also blessed with visits from many interesting interlocutors.

In the first half of the 1980's the idea of a music festival for Schleswig-Holstein was conceived at that house. In 1985 in Lübeck the Schleswig Holstein Music Festival was inaugurated. Frantz as the founding father succeeded in recruiting his friend Eschenbach as a curator, performer, and teacher. On the advisory board, I sat with Eschenbach and many others, and for the inaugural event the two of them played Mozart and Saint-Saëns – and I gave a lecture. As early as the first festival Eschenbach was already active as a conductor. He also founded the youth orchestra of the SHMF, for all his life he saw the mentorship of young musicians as a part of his calling. Years later, from 1999 to 2002, Eschenbach took over the artistic directorship of the festival, and co-managed it with Rolf Beck.

Christoph Eschenbach and I crossed paths over the decades many times. And I can say that every one of these encounters was to my advantage, for I always cherished the man as well as the musician. He is an educated man, with whom one can discuss numerous subjects—including music, of course. We are united, for example, in our love of Bach. He claims that he enjoys beginning each day with a piece by Bach, insofar as a piano is available. Otherwise he just imagines the piece – I find this very endearing and can understand it very well.

For me Christoph Eschenbach is a superb musician, both as a pianist and as a conductor. But he is also a wonderful person, a star who never puts on airs, a soft-spoken man, an unassuming jewel – and still a man of greatness. What a remarkable achievement in the first 75 years. We are lucky to be able to look forward to many more concerts from him.

Ad multos annos, Christoph!