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musikstiftung

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An Emblem

Encomium for Christoph Eschenbach

In bestowing the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize upon Christoph Eschenbach, the foundation sets an emblematic mark: not an exclamation mark, rather something quiet and introspective, as befits the character of the prizewinner. We would like to provoke consideration of what really matters in music and in life; of whether we are moving along a street of dreams – or along the path into a cul-de-sac.

The livelihood of a musician can take a complete about-face turn, without any prior indication of which was the true and which the false path. A musician can strive to achieve the highest level of professionalism, a kind of pure specialization: be it a concentration on just one instrument, a tightly circumscribed repertoire, the „historically informed“ performance practice, or, in some cases, a single composer.

This path into virtual isolation was certainly available to Christoph Eschenbach after he won the ARD Music Competition here in Munich in 1962, then went on to win the no less prestigious Concours Clara Haskil in Switzerland three years later. Then he would have become today's „Mozart pianist“ or „Schumann pianist,“ a highly specialized interpreter of but a few volumes of music at the piano: „the Schumann expert,“ who for the fifth time has recorded the *Kinderszenen*, whereupon the critics discover that for this version he needed two seconds more to play *Träumerei* than he'd needed the fourth time around.

To be sure, the decision to achieve such musical specialization, to consciously narrow one's focus, reflects a familiar societal development and logic, and it's possible that the entire world can be captured in the microcosm of a strictly defined piano literature. On the other hand, such a limitation and monothematicism is reminiscent of that old joke, with which you are surely all familiar. The one that states: an expert is a person who continually knows more and more about less and less, until in the end he knows everything about nothing.

From early on, Christoph Eschenbach eschewed this paradoxical triumph of understanding: he did not want to spend his life with his back to the horizon. Already as a student he chose a different path, one diametrically opposed to specialization – he chose the open-ended path. Eschenbach did not just study piano, but also violin (albeit not with solo ambitions, rather as an assimilation of orchestral culture), and he adopted the unlearnable craft of the conductor. Thus Christoph Eschenbach became exposed to a two- or threefold perspective on musical life – variety instead of one-sidedness. To be sure, the aforementioned competitive successes allowed him to first pursue a solo career, with solo recordings on the premier label of the time, Deutsche Grammophon, and with concerts and projects with the Berlin Philharmonic under Herbert von Karajan. Yet in spite of this early and universally acknowledged mastery, Eschenbach did not allow himself to be pigeonholed through the canon of famous works or the „greatest hits“ of the classical genre. In the epoch-making year 1968, for example, he undertook the premiere of Hans Werner Henze's Second Piano Concerto. Christoph Eschenbach played the concerto with a sheer unbelievable sense of pianistic identification, one which bordered on the miraculous. He continued to play the piece for many years, shrugging off all the objections associated with the composer's unmistakable political orientation.

It is with this work, Henze's Second Piano Concerto, that I first heard Christoph Eschenbach play, nearly 50 years ago, which also prompted me to seek him out soon thereafter in Hamburg. Thus our friendship has lasted nearly half a century – I would like to state that fact on the record once and for all, because it is anything but self-evident, in light of the pomp and circumstance of the international concert business, and because our friendships all-too-often suffer due to the demands of our careers. I am all the more touched (as well as relieved) to be able to share so many common memories with a friend and colleague.

When I first encountered him in the 1960's, Christoph Eschenbach was already a veteran of the solo touring circuit, yet he himself did not regard this time as especially glamorous; rather, he found the solitude of the piano player burdensome: to be alone with the work, in an endless soliloquy with and without audiences, caught in the role of the „Alleinunterhalter" [one-man band], as he himself characterized it. Life as an eternal tour, with hotels that were not always the poshest, concert halls that were not always the best, soon grated on him, even though he did turn the circumstances to his advantage and come to regard the constant travelling as an intellectual adventure: as a worthwhile chance to discover foreign lands, new cities, unfamiliar museums, unaccustomed attitudes. Christoph Eschenbach refers to it as his „Lebensbildungsreise" [educational life journey].

Still, a musical life in the inner circle of the pianistic elite soon became too confining. In his early thirties Christoph Eschenbach began his „second career" as a conductor, and although he was celebrated among the leading artists of the piano, he took no shortcuts in his new career: the galley years of a capellmeister with a gift for learning and a curious spirit. George Szell in Cleveland and Herbert von Karajan in Berlin were his mentors, who stood by him with advice and deeds, inviting him to rehearsals, making music together and carrying on conversations about fundamentals. Szell taught him the rhetoric of music-making, the formulation of musical phrases, the traditional „tone language" of the 18th century, while Karajan taught him the art of transitions, of harmonic refinement, of „tone colors" in keeping with the sensibilities of early modernism.

Christoph Eschenbach soon advanced to the highest echelon, and would go on, up to the present day, to lead the prominent orchestras of the new and the old world: in Europe, Zürich's Tonhalle Orchestra, the North German Radio Symphony Orchestra in Hamburg and the Orchestre de Paris, which he also vociferously supported as it sought to build a new concert hall – and by now this concert hall has indeed been built and opened to the public! At the same time, in tandem with these three European orchestras Eschenbach led the Houston Symphony Orchestra in the United States, which he took over during a period of artistic and financial imbalance. Being as long on tenacity as he was, he sat through even longer fundraising dinners, bringing the organization on firm financial footing and giving them new musical energy. Later Christoph Eschenbach stood at the helm of the legendary Philadelphia Orchestra, following in the shoes of Ormandy, Muti and Sawallisch; and finally he was named the music director of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington. Christoph Eschenbach always kept the identity and idiosyncracy of his American orchestras intact, while also steering them toward a characteristically European sound, particularly in the strings, which for all their technical perfection under his baton where always unusually warm in timbre, and possessed of a light, airy phrasing. As it is I always admired how he managed to transfer the qualities he gained at the keyboard into the métier of the conductor, above all the quality of cantabile, the „singing piano". He has said „singing is the most direct of human musical expressions," and let us not forget that as a pianist he also adopted a virtually encyclopedic repertoire of song literature, performing this repertoire with such voice personalities as Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Peter Schreier, Renée Fleming and Matthias Goerne – in highly memorable Lieder recitals around the world, including here in Munich.

Music, like all acts of human kindness, thrives on word-of-mouth, on sharing and exchanging. The same generosity, trust, and encouragement that Christoph Eschenbach received from supporters in his youth he now passes on to the most talented musicians, whom he aids with lessons, recommendations, and

collaborative projects – not just „discovering“ them, but also accompanying them over many years in friendship and great empathy. Among them we can count the aforementioned soprano Renée Fleming, with whom Eschenbach particularly concentrated on the vocal jewels of Richard Strauss; also the violinist Julia Fischer, the pianists Tzimon Barto and Lang Lang (who in spite of his own „world famous“ status still seeks out the advice of his mentor) or the cellists Claudio Bohórquez and Daniel Müller-Schott. Eschenbach's life maxim, namely, that one has never finished learning, gives him sustenance for an open, untiring exchange of ideas with younger musician colleagues. It is also his way of expressing gratitude for the good fortune that befell him when he, too, was young.

For the composers, for *us* composers, Christoph Eschenbach is also a friend and supporter. Eschenbach has poured significant energy into New Music since the beginning, be it in premieres by Wolfgang Rihm, Aribert Reimann, Matthias Pintscher, Marc-André Dalbavie or Pascal Dusapin. He prepares the new scores with the same great diligence as musical texts of the great tradition. Anyone who has taken a peek at conductor scores prepared by him will have seen the countless markings, and have learned about the responsibilities of the interpreter, who strives to recognize, through precise analysis of the new composition, the meaning and function of every single musical shape in relation to the whole, and to translate it into a conducted gesture. Particularly memorable for me is a concert that he led at the turn of the millennium in Hamburg. That evening was given the title „Sieben Horizonte“ [Seven Horizons], and it included seven new commissions from seven composers, lasting till well after midnight.

I said it at the start and will gladly repeat it at the end of my encomium: the Ernst von Siemens Music Foundation would like to make a mark with the bestowal of this prize. It is also our intention to take note of an unusual and poignant fate: for in the person of Christoph Eschenbach we hereby distinguish an individual who was once a refugee. After World War II the orphaned Breslau native entered a refugee camp, which was visited by a typhus outbreak – of which he was the sole survivor. The trauma of this experience robbed him of his ability to speak, until his adoptive mother took him into her care. It was through her singing and through music that he gradually returned to the fullness of life. I don't have to explain why such a fate can never be „overcome“, and that it by necessity awakens a certain political sensibility. And I hardly need to justify why this life history is as relevant as ever today, in light of the most recent, dreadful events, which make it shockingly clear that, even 70 years after the end of that war, the wars continue to rage. The life of the pianist, conductor, pedagogue, inspiration, and mentor Christoph Eschenbach is an emblem, an emblem of hope, which simultaneously utters a quiet, penetrating reminder that, behind every one of the anonymous life stories that disappear behind the refugee statistics, a promise about the future lies concealed, and that it is our duty, nay our obligation, to defend this future. It belongs to every human being who, driven by need and the will to live, sets out on a long and dangerous journey with an unknown conclusion. Thus the 75-year-old laureate is both witness and guarantor of the future that lies in all of our hands. And for which we are all responsible.

May 31, 2015 | The spoken word shall be binding.