

## How humanistic must music be? On music in times of war: the PhD Honoris Causa for Evgeny Kissin in Weimar



### The honorary doctorate

On October 22, 2022, the 211th birthday of Franz Liszt, the pianist Evgeny Kissin received an honorary doctorate from the Department of Musicology Weimar-Jena at the Franz Liszt University of Music in Weimar. He was awarded with this honorary doctorate for his outstanding and extraordinary artistic pianistic achievements, especially in connection with his services to conveying the pianistic oeuvre of Franz Liszt. On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the University of Music Franz Liszt, it was only natural to honor an international pianist.

Evgeny Kissin's literary activities in the Yiddish language were also recognized, as were his efforts to promote "humanism in the world" through his musical work. This "musical humanism" further encourages reflection on the ethical role of music, especially in our days when old world orders are in danger of falling apart.



*The Doctoral award, with the President of the University of Music Franz Liszt Weimar, Prof. Anne Kathrin Lindig and the Head of the faculty on human sciences Prof. Jörn Arnecke*

What is musical humanism?

First and foremost, it is about a basic attitude that is expressed free of dogmatic consolidation in musical practice, in the mediation of music and by virtue of a deeper intellectual examination of it. Musical humanism, then, is the recognition that musicians have both the freedom and the responsibility to give meaning to their lives by enriching themselves and the society musically.

The history of Europe, in particular its history of thought, is characterized by a humanism that refers to the origin of Western cultural history in ancient Greece, which was taken up again in the Renaissance and continued to take on new forms up to the 20th century, up to for the drafting of the Human Rights Convention in 1948. It is about people, about their relationship to the community, to history and to the environment.

But dealing with music, especially where the musical heritage is kept alive and both talent and complex knowledge are based on it, has long proven that people transcend themselves through music, that musical instruments complement the human body, that the consciousness in the moment of making music, but also of reception, become fundamentally expanded. The experiences that take hold here cannot be achieved other than through music. They also play an important role in passing on musical knowledge, as a true living heritage from one generation to the next.

The factors that came together at the honorary doctorate and the concert in Weimar were actually very different. From Kissin two compositions were performed, his string quartet op. 3, played by the Weimar "Gropius Quartet" (three of the members are professors at the university) and his new op. 6, a piano trio, played by the professors Friedemann Eichhorn, violin and Wolfgang Emanuel Schmidt, cello. Kissin himself was at the piano.



*The Piano Trio from Evgeny Kissin, op. 6, "For Ukraine" (Kissin at the piano, with Friedemann Eichhorn violin and Emanuel Wolfgang Schmidt cello.*

### Early experiences

Kissin has always been exceptional in his statements and in his appearance - exceptionally reserved, exceptionally precise, but now also exceptionally open and direct. As a child prodigy who was cared for by his mother and his (only) piano teacher until he was an adult, he seemed shy at first and was reserved, in complete contrast to his piano playing, which grew monumentally at an unusually early age.

For the entrance exam at the Gnessin Music School in Moscow, the 11-year-old played Franz Liszt's Rhapsody No. 12, which he had not learned from sheet music but from hearing. An extraordinary process, especially for a child. For this he used a recording from the parental record collection of the American pianist Van Cliburn. He passed the entrance exam with this piece, among others. Thus, Franz Liszt played an important role in Evgeny Kissin's repertoire from the very beginning, and in a particularly sensitive way.

Kissin remained largely independent of formal institutions throughout his life. The only music academy he attended was important to him because of Anna Kantor, his teacher. When Kissin first performed in the United States, a New York Times reviewer wrote of him: "Unlike all famous Russian pianists, this young pianist has the great privilege of never having taken part in an international piano competition, nor having studied at the Moscow

Tchaikovsky Conservatory." Evgeny Kissin's independence, lived from the very beginning, shapes his own musical humanism.

This is also characterized by the fact that Kissin uses literature, poetry, philosophy, political science and social sciences to think beyond music, not to leave it, but to get even closer to it. In-depth conversations with him often become a journey through the history of literature, both Russian and world literature, stimulating, enlightening and musically educational at the same time. Musical cultural heritage becomes genuine lively cultural divers.

Remembrance and Memorial.

But what can music do against war and barbarism? For Kissin, Russia's attack on Ukraine caused a cut regarding his attitude towards life and thus towards music.

In his freely presented Weimar acceptance speech - after the laudations and the presentation of the doctoral certificate - the pianist summed up his position on the Russian background to the recent devastation in the Ukraine. As a Russian, he is more concerned with what is happening, it touches him directly emotionally. So what does it mean for him to be on stage in the future when music can no longer and may not ignore current world events? In his speech, Kissin denounced the Russian head of state three times, adding the Hebrew exclamation: *Yimakh shmo* — "may his name be cursed!", which amounts to a *damnatio memoriae*, the eradication of all memory concerning this person. What can be severer for someone than being wiped out, to have the complete destruction of his own monuments? In any case, this is the Jewish answer to contempt for human beings, the absolute negation of those responsible for crimes against humanity.

Music is the inverse of this Jewish negation. In its immaterial nature, lasting values and sustainable work are bound, i.e. music stands for human values and for the creative mind of people.

Attitude through music

"If Ukraine loses, the whole world loses," the Hamburger Abendblatt recently titled an interview with Evgeny Kissin. In other words, one could also say: "when the music falls silent, all mankind falls silent."

Because of the Ukraine war well-known musicians who are in the public limelight, especially from Russia, have often found it difficult to position themselves politically. This is understandable, because since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, their evaluation, which flows either in one direction or the other, either in the pros or in the cons, has been made by the media, appears on talk shows and now in numerous reports and conversations but not satisfying, and certainly not bringing about a perfect attitude in the face of the inhuman, remains tormenting, disturbing, and above all deeply unmusical for those affected. So attitude is needed, at least for those who can afford it.



It is remarkable how Kissin has been able to assert himself in the current world affair. He does this by confronting the situation head-on. But not just with words, but with an attitude in the way he now appears on stage and selects his repertoire. Especially also in how he plans the thematic work of his own compositions.

#### The composer

Artists and thinkers have repeatedly puzzled over where humanism and humanity have remained in the face of war, exploitation, mass extermination and barbarism. Similar questions are asked again today. Kissin faces these questions primarily as a composer. On the evening of October 22, 2022, he performed in the double function of composer and pianist.

Evgeny Kissin's Piano Trio op. 6 was completed in August 2022 and was written as a reaction to the invasion of Ukraine. In the first movement, the composition refers to war and destruction. By doing so, it is also a plea against brutality and inhumanity. The opening mood sounds somber, alternating between violin and cello, held together by the piano part. The visual element that Kissin builds into this sentence is the "Z" that is used to identify Russian tanks and military vehicles, which is medially transposed into a harsh musical motif.

Music shows that it represents more than just a symbol because, like a script, it is also capable of making statements, and these can be very concrete. In Kissin's op. 6, for example, it is the cluster of sounds struck with the fist (*col pugno*) in fortissimo in the bass, which literally expresses indignation and at the same time sounds like rocket and grenade impacts. His music not only describes, it empathizes.

Kissin's piano trio brings this state of mind close to compositions by Dmitri Shostakovich, for example the E minor Piano Trio op. 67 from 1944. The musical means are there again in Kissin's op. 6, their "sense reservoirs" are again available, but the meaning has changed. Not

a hidden allusion, as Shostakovich later articulated against Stalin, especially in his 9th symphony, but with Kissin an absolutely open, almost striking accusation.

The 2nd movement contains a Ukrainian folk song and a Yiddish theme. Together they express, so to speak, the suffering of a battered folk soul. Just like the Jewish elements, the theme presented in the flageolet in the cello is clearly reminiscent of Shostakovich (Piano Trio op. 67).

Finally, the last movement spills out into a musical firework, in which Eastern European folk dance sounds and where finally the Ukrainian national anthem lights up as an apotheosis, performed in octaves by violin and cello and steered by the piano in overwhelming fortissimo runs, covering the entire keyboard, towards the redeeming end. Experiencing the composer himself at the piano was one of the highlights of the evening.

In the end, Kissin's composition raises the question of whether the war was necessary at all for such compelling music to emerge. Can barbarism also be the driving force behind aesthetic works? A look at the history of music, also at music cultures far beyond the occidental area, confirms it.

#### Intimacy and farewell

For the students, the academic celebration for Evgeny Kissin was not just a unique opportunity to experience the world star up close – to have him sign autographs and take selfies. It was mainly his presence through music that lasted the most unforgettable impression. The entire audience were deeply impressed by the directness of Kissin's words and the intensity of his composition and its performance.

At the end of his stay of several days in Goethe's city of Weimar - in his historically sharpened perception the city of the "Weimar Republic" - Kissin was able to find a new closeness to Franz Liszt. When visiting Liszt's apartment in Belvedere Park, Kissin suddenly realized that he was standing in the rooms where Franz Liszt had lived and worked for almost 20 years of his life. Kissin literally came into contact with Liszt's aura. Franz Liszt's bed and the porcelain washbasin on the table opposite were just a few of the many objects that suddenly acquired a special symbolic power and thus created an immediate closeness to Liszt.

At the end of the tour, Kissin reverently examined the grand piano specially made for Liszt by the piano manufacturer Bechstein in the music and study room. Then the unforeseen happened and yet it was a matter of course for an artist like Kissin: he sat down on the piano stool, set it up, briefly touched the surface of the letters of the Bechstein brand name plate inlaid in brass, wiped the keyboard gently with his fingertips, and then began to play, to completely immerse himself in Franz Liszt's "Liebestraum" No. 3...

And with that, Evgeny Kissin gave his farewell to Weimar.



*The encounter with Franz Liszt*

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