

Evgeny Kissin - Musical Humanist

(Weimar, at the 211nd anniversary of Franz Liszt)

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When in the past few years the jubilee of the 150 years of our university was approaching, I had the wish to use the celebration year as an opportunity to honor a well-known personality from the music world, a person who, like Franz Liszt, is particularly close to a single musical instrument: the piano.

In addition to excellent mastery of the piano, an intensive study of the oeuvre of Franz Liszt was required; a personality, finally, who not only understands music for its own sake, but also uses it in its important function in human education, similar to what Franz Liszt did throughout his life.

This exceptional musician is Evgeny Kissin.

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After the pianist Kissin and the poet Kissin have been honored by the previous two speakers, I would like to end this “laudatory trilogy” to pursue the question of **musical humanism**, to which Evgeny Kissin is close. He may not have even asked himself this question, which is not surprising, because the humanism that is at stake is not rationally thought out, cannot be planned in advance or be implemented with calculation.

What is musical humanism?

First and foremost, this is an ethical attitude that is expressed through music, in the teaching of music and through a deeper intellectual examination of it, **free of dogmatic consolidation**. 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 people **musically**.

In the musical career of Evgeny Kissin I see four forms of humanism:

(1) Humanism does not arise alone

It is true that people **form** their own destiny through humanistic education, but Evgeny Kissin's parents, later his teacher Anna Kantor and still his mother shared responsibility for this, from his childhood on.

Only from this comprehensive participation of certain trend-setting people in his education - not only the musical one - it is understandable that Kissin played Rhapsody No. 12 by Franz Liszt for the entrance examination at the Gnessin Music School as a child, without learning it from sheet music, but by hearing alone. For this he used a recording from his parents' record collection, a LP by the American pianist Van Cliburn. The process testifies to an extraordinary musicality (Prof. Gruzman rightly spoke of the Wunderkind), which, however, was also made possible by the social context that was open to Kissin's early humanistic musicality. He passed the Gnessin Music School entrance exam with this piece, among others. Thus, Franz Liszt played an important role in Evgeny Kissin's repertoire from the very start on (even if he might have had a sort of "influence" from Van Cliburn at first).

(2) Humanism does not depend on formal institutions

Like any form of living cultural heritage, achievements in the fields of art and science are institutionally framed, but they live of their own content, independent of formal constraints and institutional support. When Kissin first performed in the United States, a reviewer for the NYT 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." Independence like that lived by Kissin from the beginning stands for a musical humanism that is otherwise rarely encountered.

(3) Humanism shines even when darkness grows around it

The ominous darkness that determines world affairs in these times makes it difficult to find a suitable answer to the current Zeitgeist. Evgeny Kissin unexpectedly became involved in the discussions about the war in Ukraine. In the face of violence and barbarism, what kind of meaning can there be through music? Evgeny Kissin's playing stands for this, but also his compositions. "Kissin conveys," as Joachim Kaiser once said of the young Kissin, "an almost somnambulistic ability to create infinitely sophisticated nuances as the most natural thing in the world." His piano trio, which is being premiered today, is full of these clear nuances that say more than many words put together and are able to throw a ray of light into a prevailing gloom.

(4) Humanism is generosity

The musical humanism that stands for Evgeny Kissin is extravagant in its generosity, it is musical in the broadest sense because it uses literature, poetry, philosophy, political and social sciences to point beyond music, without leaving, but to get even closer to it. I always remember the conversations with Evgeny as a walk through literature, both Russian and world literature, stimulating, enlightening and musically educational at the same time.

And finally, it was the absence of Evgeny Kissin himself, due to illness, that greatly missed his generosity on stage. The welcome before his performance in front of a sold-out Paris Philharmonie two weeks ago, seemed like the frenetic celebration of a long-awaited ambassador from musical worlds that are needed more urgently than ever.

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Dear Evgeny,

we, the members of the University of Music Franz Liszt, feel very honored that this institution will be part of your future life from now on, because we will also move a little closer to you. At the same time, be assured that you will always find a musical home here in Weimar, in which your humanism resonates - a house where Franz Liszt's principles of historical commitment, his belief in the power of music to unite peoples, his humanistic greatness and human generosity will always remain a role model - a role model that is worth fighting for, especially at these times, to fuel justified hope for a future with more music.

Being awarded with an honorary doctorate from the University of Music Franz Liszt Weimar on the occasion of Liszt's 211th birthday and the jubilee of this institution, it also means that we, who offered you the award, feel that we have been awarded as well. For this and for your life's work, you, dear Evgeny, deserve the greatest recognition and our deepest thanks.