

GOETHE MEDAL 2018

LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR PÉTER EÖTVÖS

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– Check against delivery –

THE PRESENT IS THE PAST OF THE FUTURE OR: A SOUND FOR EVERY WORLD!

Emptiness. A theatre. An empty stage. At the beginning. The composer appears from nowhere, every time from a different side, from where he is least expected. What we see first: His wavy, grey hair. He is dressed all in black. Smiling, he walks to the centre of the stage, makes his circles. Breathes: The light, the floor. He slowly drops to his knees and lays his ear to it. *True music is solely for the ears*, he hears from offstage. He shakes his head. *It's just in my mind*, he tells himself, *I'm not playing, I'm only thinking*. He takes two stones from his pockets as if he had dug them from the sand on Prospero's island. He bangs them together several times, rubs them together, changes the rhythm, throws them in the air. What does he hear? His heartbeat. The waves. The breakers. The trembling horizon. The sea of timbres, he feels it, but when he thinks of the sea and thinks the sea, he thinks of the innumerable bodies of the nameless drowned, of his orchestral piece *All vittime senza nome*; he creates for them a rock in oblivion, lets the notes make their distress perceptible until the water is no longer just water, waves not just waves, a beach not just a beach. The drowned, washed to the shores of oblivion to which we owe the dead if, with his sounds, he did not give them back their bodies, the memory, the choir, the children's voices in their minds with the waves in their mouths.

Our composer enters the silence as he enters the stage: with dignity, with humility, but always with a smile that lends us courage, the courage that the world is changeable and relatable through and with music. Through composing, through conducting, through teaching. Through inspiring. Through passion. For him, the present is the past of the future. He wants to make the new perceptible, tangible, audible. He gives to the new a stage, a stage where the old, the traditions, what has been saved from oblivion, the music of his origin, his home, his childhood resonate: the songs, voices, instruments, dances, Transylvania, Hungary. Everything continues, and he continues it with his work, with new compositions, works that are always different. He would never repeat anything; he continues what counts with young people, whom he teaches without lecturing, continues with ideas that unfold themselves in innumerable conversations with his pupils, students, through his belief in creating together. He is a proponent, an advocate, an encourager, he is modest like no other composer, but all the more determined when it comes down to the cause and the gist of the matter. Let's go back: We see him moving on the stage; he moves as if he were writing – or is he dancing? He takes every step as if he were setting a note. He is barefoot even though he wears black shoes; he shows us how naked we are under the mantle of silence. He tracks us down, our traces in that past. He does it with his works, the music, with his sound worlds. Everything he has written is present every moment.

Atlantis, as one of his early opuses is called, this Atlantis: it could also be submerged below-stage, or his piece *Levitation* right here below the shuddering floorboards. Every place is a

place of the ears. With him the eyes learn to hear, the ears to see. And much more: He reveals the mechanics of the invisible. He is a linguistic acrobat: His music speaks all languages and every piece speaks a new one. He is a voice acrobat: he learns the languages by listening to the voices, but his voices do not create a Babel, but multiply, overlay, contradict, somersault, merge into a single, universal language that everyone understands and makes everything that we think we do not understand comprehensible in the hearing. His music frees us. But he also always lets the counter voice have a say and become. And even when he paints in monochrome, he has more colours than Goethe's colour theory. But we don't want to lose sight of him: Where is he right now, our composer?

There! He raises his forehead to the stage's sky that he is protesting with a wink, a lift of his eyebrows. Or are we mistaken? Was it just a cue? A cue for the technician who may be up there, the hovering orchestra. As for that, he hides orchestras everywhere, multiplies them, encircles us. There, a single spotlight is turning up there and suddenly our composer is standing in the light. What is he doing in the light? He walks from the light. He doesn't like being in the spotlight. The music should be in the spotlight, shine, enlighten. The spotlight follows him. He walks to the ramp, to the cliff. Here, he feels safe. He looks up again, shields his eyes with his hand, his face in shadow. As if he could see better that way. The orchestra pit below him is in darkness. What is he doing now, what is he doing there? He breaks a baton from the stage floor. But he didn't need it. Or was it a pencil? The floor is white anyway: a sheet of paper. The composer draws his lines, writes notes, as if the wind were writing them, as if the wind had circled the world, bringing with it the breath of every shore, the breath of the mountains, the people of all countries, as if it came here with its lungs full of stories and all that's been forgotten, as if all the pauses, all the scents were within this whirlwind, as if this wind were now in his hand, in the composer's hand while writing or better: His hand stays still, but the floor, yes, the floor, the paper moves, because the composer, because Peter writes with dreams, the top notes. And so quickly that we almost miss it, the whole floor in front of us is filled with writing. And his notes are more than just notes, they are also stage directions, the singers will read them from the floor like something long sought and finally found. If it were possible, I am sure, with his lips to Kleist's ear, he would have composed each of his *Achs*.

But there it is again suddenly, this voice from offstage: *He who does not love music does not deserve to be called a human being; he who merely loves it is only half a human being; but he who makes music is a whole human being.* Is the voice in his mind, the composer wonders. No, now he sees him, a masterful gentleman in a hat in the middle of the auditorium, where the director usually sits during rehearsals, and he tells our composer to walk a bit farther to the right, the golden dragon is there, no, of course he means golden mean, and he, Mister von Goethe, the director, naturally says the wrong thing, as if to provoke contradiction from the composer, Goethe: *Music, in the best sense, does not require novelty; nay, the older it is, and the more we are accustomed to it, the greater its effect.* But our composer's music has an effect like no other! And ever anew: tremendously unheard of unheard tremendousness! But the poet in the auditorium, who is still talking – maybe he's had a little too much cider – is quite right, even though his accent and syncopated slurs make him almost unintelligible. *He who does not love music, says Goethe, does not deserve to be called a human being; he who merely loves it is only half a human being; but he who makes music is a whole human being.* The composer listens to him calmly, he regards the poet like a rare butterfly, a precious, shimmering insect, and now he, Goethe, even speaks in verse:

*Zuerst im stillsten Raum entsprungen,
Das Lied erklingt von Ort zu Ort:*

*| It came out of a silent space,
the tune now sounds from place to place:*

Wie es in Seel und Geist erklungen,
So hallt's nach allen Zeiten fort.

And as it sounded in my soul,
forever it will fill us all.

How beautiful, how graceful, thinks the composer, but then he just draws a line in the air with his hand and Goethe is silent, his lips are closed, and what's happened now: the baron disappears with a poof and a black poodle darts through the rows of the theatre. Later, when he has him on his leash, the composer will walk him through this unique city of Weimar, he is never as relaxed as while walking his dog. And when he does, he recalls driving his Citroën, which he had bought and needed because of its hydraulic suspension, over the Hungarian countryside almost like a missionary to promote new music and not forget the old. As in his music, he is always on the road; a personified road movie. With every composition, every project he wants to enter a new way of thinking. And in everything he composes, in everything he says, he discovers something about which he can say: that's me, too. His relationship to music, sounds, notes is like that of a fish to water. As our Prospero says, I live in it and I cannot imagine anything else. Everything is alive for him and he can bring everything to life and sound. Even stones, by beating them together. But now the composer is alone again on stage, we think. He stealthily looks around to make sure, and then he snaps his fingers like a magician and lo and behold, a Transylvanian fur hat falls from the stage sky. Yes, a fur hat. And in this heat. The composer puts it on, remembering his childhood with a tear in his eye, his mother, her music school, the visits by the strict Messrs Kodály and Ligeti. And the stage turns again, life, turns forward, but also back, and he, the little boy, the child prodigy sits at a piano and plays a recital, and the fur hat becomes his invisibility hat and he travels through the ages and countries and one curtain after another falls, and suddenly one of them is a screen, and on it a Hungarian film is shown, and the young student and composer improvises, plays even the jazz, forbidden at the university, he plays as if he were moving the pictures and not the pictures his fingers, because it is he who moves, the hearts, the ears, the passion. We watch in amazement: He always finds a technique with which he can make the unbelievable into music. And then, what's happening now, the floor opens, and from under the stage a world premiere machine emerges (it is Pierre Boulez's Ensemble Intercontemporain, whose director he became in 1979 and with which he alone premiered more than one hundred new works by 1991), yes, it rises in the middle of the stage and a man with a Swabian accent and an oil can in his hand always shouts just before the world premiere miracle becomes rigid: *Mouvement!* And another composer, on another track: *Thursday!* And then it's light, the whole stage, everything is light, a flash, calligraphies, choreographies of cryptic characters, scores on curtains, *Radames*, *Le Balcon*, projectors, space shuttles, very grand opera, and between them all is the magic of our composer, and he asks his master Boulez, who trusted him from the beginning and had confidence in him to do anything: Pierre, is there anything you would criticize? And Boulez just answers: Peter, you know that much better than I! And he did know it. And he learned. And he teaches. *If there were more creative people, he says, the world would be better. We shouldn't pay so much attention to who is the greatest, but to how to pave people's paths to creativity.*

Yes, he makes us all more creative. What nicer thing could one say? For me, he is the Shakespeare among composers. And now the orchestra pit is filled, there are all his characters, Chekhov's three sisters, the tenors, musicians from Africa and Asia, *the opera comes to life when the stage comes to life*, the very first note is an invitation to the audience, and now everything comes alive and there's Frank Zappa at the drums, and Lilith at the first violin and Duke Bluebeard next to the pretty cellists, and there is the wonderful Mandarin, *Peter, play something pretty*, a whole circus sits there in the pit, acrobats whirl through the air, tumbling over the horns, flutes, clarinets, triangles, a bird flies and sets a whole flock in

motion, it seems like chaos, but each one knows where to fly and they all fly together, and there are angels, a panorama on stage, a peal of thunder, and the future flashes from the present, and there he stands, Peter Eötvös, on stage with his eyes closed, and now he slowly opens them and he sees with astonishment that the theatre is filled to the last seat and we all laugh and applaud him with all our hearts, and even Goethe stands up, and we all congratulate you, dear Peter, on this wonderful Goethe Medal: Nobody deserves it more than you!!