

What is that good for? | Reflecting on culture in the light of events at the beginning of the year

by Jochen Ressel



Vienna is often referred to as one of the cultural capitals of the world. Alongside the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, the Opéra National de Paris, the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, the Royal Opera House Covent Garden in London, the Semperoper in Dresden and the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, the Vienna "Staatsoper" is one of the most important opera houses in the world and for every opera star it is a "must" to perform in Vienna - many careers have even begun in Vienna, with its important educational institutions such as the University of Music and Performing Arts, including the well-known Max Reinhard Seminar with its focus on acting.

Outstanding cultural events consolidate Vienna's undisputed reputation as a city of culture, such as the Vienna Festival Weeks, the Viennale, and foremost the New Year's Concert, which is performed by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and a star conductor of their choice in the famous Golden Hall of the Musikverein every year, broadcasted in more than 90 countries and watched by more than 50 million people worldwide. Speaking of New Year's concerts: Traditionally, the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, supported by the famous 110-member choir "Wiener Singakademie", performs Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, "Ode to Joy", three times in a row each year, on December 30th and 31st, and on New Year's Day, in the Great Hall of the Vienna Konzerthaus.

It is a special pleasure for me to be part of Vienna's cultural offerings, as an ensemble member of the Vienna Cathedral Choir, with whom we perform about 25 times a year in St. Stephen's Cathedral, and as a guest singer with the Vienna Singakademie.

In that capacity I have had the very pleasure of being part of these special Beethoven's No. 9 concerts since 2017. It's only been a few days since we finished our New Year's concerts, so it's a good time to reflect on them.

In retrospect, we are sometimes asked by others and thus also confronted with asking ourselves: What is that good for? Or in the words of the famous conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt, who died in 2016, in his cynical opening statement to the famous Salzburg Festival: "What good is the language of culture if no one speaks it anymore?"

A valid question, or not?

Although it is justified and even necessary to reflect on whether what we are doing makes sense - both in our private lives and at work - the question "But does it do any good?" is mainly asked by the unimaginative and perspective-less relativism that I consider one of the great diseases of our time. It is, in a sense, the excuse for doing nothing when the benefits cannot be measured in advance. It calls into question the good it could possibly do because it is not imaginable, or the phantasy for what it could do is lacking.

My answer to this question is (not completely surprisingly...): Of course, it makes sense. Let me argue this on the basis of the Beethoven No. 9 concerts we have just performed by taking a joint look at the famous text by Friedrich Schiller that inspired Beethoven to wrap it up in an outstanding composition.

<p>Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125</p> <p>Recitativo</p> <p>O friends, not these tones! Rather, let us sing more pleasant And more joyous ones.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Ludwig van Beethoven</p> <p>Ode to Joy</p> <p>Joy, beautiful divine spark, Daughter from Elysium, We enter your sanctuary, Heavenly one, drunk with fire. Your magic reunites that Which custom strictly sunders; All people become brothers Wherever your gentle wing abides.</p> <p>Whoever has the great fortune To be the friend of a friend, Whoever has won a lovely woman, Let him add his jubilation; Yes, whoever calls even one soul His own the world around. And he who has not been able, Let him slink crying from this company.</p>	<p>All beings drink joy From the bosom of nature; All who are good, all evil Follow her trail of roses. She gave us kisses and vines, A friend, tested in death; Voluptuousness was given to the worm, And the Cherub stands before God.</p> <p>Happily as his suns fly Through heaven's splendid arena Run your course, brothers, Joyfully, as a hero to victory.</p> <p>Be embraced, O millions. This kiss for the whole world. Brothers! above the starry tent Must dwell a loving father.</p> <p>You fall down, millions? Can you conceive the Creator, Seek him in the starry tent. He must dwell above the stars.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Translation: Archive)</p>
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(Originally taken from the programme of the Vienna Konzerthaus, published for the Beethoven No.9 concerts on December 30th and 31st, 2022 and January 1st, 2023.)

At first glance, the text seems a bit strange for our understanding today, but everyone can find "translations" and explanations of its original meaning on the internet. But the key word can be understood without help: "Joy!"

A powerful message of today's highest relevance

I highly recommend you to take 1 hrs 15 min. to listen Beethoven's masterpiece, e.g. the performance of Christian Thielemann as he conducts the Choir of the Stateopera Dresden and the "Sächsische Staatskapelle Dresden" via clicking the YouTube link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wf20Mj_E_8I, where the final part including the choir performance starts from 48min 44sec.

It is an extraordinarily powerful music and it requires extreme energy from each of the singers to powerfully deliver the message. To shout this message out into the world three times in a row, as we have done in the last few days, each time in front of more than 1,800 people in a huge concert hall, and to get the auditorium's reaction to it, the energy from a total of more than 5,400 people, made us realise how much "joy" we were able to give them. The young, energetic conductor and shooting star Klaus Mäkelä knew how to create a special atmosphere and transport the great message of Schiller and Beethoven into the auditorium, as the ecstatic applause proved. I am quite sure that everyone will tell their friends and acquaintances about this experience and thus contribute to a multiplication of this great message - and I am convinced that this will certainly have a positive effect.

It is no coincidence that the last part of Beethoven's No. 9 was chosen as Europe's anthem. It conveys the message to the world that a good father must dwell above the starry sky, who cares and what makes us taking care. This is what makes Europe what it is - because compared to other regions of the world, Europe is the driving force for human dignity, justice, and responsibility for creation (often referred to as "ecological awareness and sustainability"). We sing of confidence in the future and hope for joy, just a few hundred kilometres from a theatre of war in Europe.

The alternative to this mindset is an attitude of no confidence and no hope - a fatalistic view of our future, since there is no greater force overarching us that we matter to, no universal great positive energy that could be harnessed to strengthen us. It would mean that we are left to our own devices and that the only hope lies in our own human wisdom and capacity, about which one may and even must have doubts in view of the last 150 years.

Yes, the latter is an option, but it is not one I am prepared to choose - even though we all have to cope with difficult situations from time to time. For me, there is no alternative to "Joy, beautiful divine spark of the gods! Brothers, above the starry tent must dwell a loving father. You fall down, millions? Can you conceive the Creator, seek him in the starry tent. He must dwell above the stars."

The ABS is looking forward to receiving your views and comments!



About the author

Jochen Ressel is the Secretary-General of the Austro-British Society. He worked several years for a UK company and its HQ in London. As a tenor, he is a member of the choir ensemble of the Vienna Cathedral Music, which provides musical accompaniment to large high masses, masses, requiems, and concerts in St. Stephen's Cathedral about 25 times a year. He also performs on a project basis in various choirs, including the Vienna Singakademie, which regularly performs Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra at the turn of the year. In his professional life, he holds the position as COO of SoccerCoin, a FinTech company active in the field of sports.

The opinions expressed in this article are entirely his and reflect in no way the views of the ABS.