

Young Euro Classic: A music festival in Berlin opposing war and nationalism

By Verena Nees
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The annual Young Euro Classic youth orchestra festival recently climaxed with a memorable performance in the Berlin Concert Hall.

The Young Euro Classic Peace Orchestra, established especially for the festival and made up of Russian, Ukrainian, Armenian and German musicians, performed Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in D-Minor Op. 125 (1824). According to the festival director, the orchestra was organised "under the impact of current political events as a symbol for peaceful coexistence and international understanding" and was specifically conceived to send "a signal."

The orchestra members first assembled in Berlin only nine days before the concert and rehearsed the famed symphony under the baton of Enoch zu Guttenberg, who also provided his KlangVerwaltung choir (literally, "Sound Administration") for the performance. Most of the young orchestra members were playing the piece for the first time.

Nevertheless, the 73 musicians of the Peace Orchestra managed to deliver not only a sense of generally homogeneous synergy; they also delighted their audience with a spirited and fresh version of the Ninth Symphony, devoid of the pathos associated with the customary focus on celebrating Beethoven as a German national composer. The final "Ode to Joy" chorus, whose melody has been adopted as the European anthem, and its hope for peace—"Everyone will be brothers"—climaxed into something sounding like an urgent appeal to oppose war, inhumane refugee policies and nationalism in Europe.

Some of the young participating musicians from Russia and Ukraine stressed in interviews that they would never forget the feeling of community they experienced, and conductor zu Guttenberg was also visibly impressed after the concert. After its performance on Sunday, however, the orchestra broke up again, and many of its members returned to homelands racked by war and nationalist conflicts.

Two opposed political and cultural poles

Some 1,500 young musicians from 44 countries participated in 18 concerts at the 16th Young Euro Classic Festival, including an especially large number from eastern Europe, Russia and the Caucasus, as well as an orchestra from China. They were greeted warmly by more than 20,000 visitors to the packed concert hall at Berlin's Gendarmenmarkt [a famed square]. In addition to classical works of the 19th and 20th centuries, including Russian works by Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Dmitri Shostakovich and others, the festival included—as usual—a number of world premieres. A composer's prize was awarded to Sinem Altan, a 30-year-old Turkish woman, for one of her works.

Since its inception in 2000, the Young Euro Classic has taken up the cause of enabling young artists from different cultural, national and ethnic origins to perform together, convening thousands of young musicians from a variety of western and eastern European countries.

This initiative, which emphasises the international character and human value of music, stands in stark contrast to the realities inside the European Union (EU). This year the music festival was overshadowed by the

dramatic political changes underway in Europe. This accounts for the fact that the Ukrainian youth orchestra of the Tchaikovsky Music Academy in Kiev was only able to participate thanks to a fund-raising campaign. The Kiev regime, which came to power in a coup d'état with the help of the German government, collaborates closely with fascists and wages war in eastern Ukraine, had cut the funding for the trip.

The Peace Orchestra's performance at the 2015 Young Euro Classic exposed the contradiction underlying the whole festival. The ritualistic promises to strive for peace and international cooperation, made by prominent politicians and journalists as sponsors of the various concerts, sounded particularly hollow this year.

The patron and sponsor of the Peace Orchestra, for example, was German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, one of Europe's leading warmongers. This chief of the German foreign office, which supported the orchestra financially, tried to pose as a promoter of peace, declaring that the concert was a "counterpoint" to the Ukraine crisis. He said it provided a certain alternative to "political speechlessness" and helped overcome "discord." The same Steinmeier has frequently pleaded for an end to the policy of military restraint in Germany and beats the drum for an aggressive course against Russia in the Ukraine crisis.

Besides Steinmeier, the sponsors of the concerts also included the current head of the German governmental press and information agency, Steffen Seibert, who presented the National Youth Philharmonic Orchestra of Turkey. Foreign relations committee chairman Norbert Röttgen (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) introduced the Ukrainian Symphony Orchestra from Kiev. Other prominent German establishment figures on hand included incumbent Berlin mayor Michael Müller (Social Democratic Party, SPD) together with other representatives of the Berlin Senate, evening news anchor Caren Miosga and former head of ARD television studio headquarters Ulrich Deppendorf.

The tense political situation often made itself felt in the concert hall, so much so that its voltage actually seemed to crackle on the orchestra platform. Music does not take place in a vacuum—and the sparks that jumped from the young musicians to the audience also shed light on the gulf between them and the political elite.

A European Union Youth Orchestra with a Russian programme

The opposing political poles were also reflected in other concerts. This was certainly the case at the concert of the European Union Youth Orchestra (EUYO) under the direction of conductor Xian Zhang on August 11, which was one of the festival highlights.

The oldest European youth orchestra, consisting of 140 musicians from all the 28 EU member states, has performed under many famous conductors and on numerous international tours around the world in the 40 years of its existence. Its members are selected each year from approximately 4,000 candidates. Its current musical director is Vladimir Ashkenazy.

The orchestra's programme features the rarely played Fantasy Overture

to “Hamlet” Op. 67 (1888) and the “Rococo Variations” for Cello and Orchestra Op. 33 (1877) by Tchaikovsky, whose birth 175 years ago is being celebrated this year, as well as the Symphony No. 5 in D-Minor Op. 47 (1937) of Dmitri Shostakovich, who died 40 years ago.

Contemporary music culture is hardly imaginable without the influence of these two great composers. And yet it seems almost revolutionary at the present time that a Chinese conductor and a highly professional European youth orchestra should devote their whole evening programme to Russian composers.

The patron of the evening, Berlin’s Financial Affairs Senator Matthias Kollatz-Ahnen (SPD), was himself clearly aware of this when he opened the concert and, after a few platitudes about a unified European community, finally almost apologetically added that even Russia might have “a couple of European traits.”

The young musicians and their conductor were more courageous. The music they played dispelled the official anti-Russian propaganda and won enthusiastic applause from the audience. From the very beginning, the public’s attention was galvanised by a sensitive interpretation of Tchaikovsky’s Hamlet Overture, devoid of all romantic gloss. The Rococo Variations were rendered by cello soloist Alisa Weilerstein (born Rochester, New York in 1982) with a virtuosity that combined Bach’s intricate precision with the lightness of dance.

Above all, however, listeners were moved by the performance of Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony, which was premiered in the middle of Stalin’s Great Terror in 1937. This symphony was long criticised in the West as a product of the composer’s supposed adaptation and submission to the Stalinist regime, after his Fourth Symphony had left him in disfavour. In recent times, the Fifth has been treated instead as an expression of covert opposition to the Stalinist regime.

The European Union Youth Orchestra interpreted the work free of any ideologically charged prejudice and thus delivered an astonishingly deep performance. Shostakovich would have been able to see himself in this interpretation. Perhaps it was due to the youth and the multinational background of the orchestra’s musicians that they succeeded in transmitting both the Fifth Symphony’s grief and its revolutionary spirit to the modern audience. The jubilation and applause at the end of the concert were overwhelming.

And in the light of this, some of the comments from the media were all the more reprehensible. The *Tagesspiegel* featured the condescending headline: “The land of the Russians searching its soul.” Worse still was Clemens Goldberg, who accused the public on the rbb [Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg] cultural radio station of not understanding Shostakovich. The “mistaken positivist conclusion that deceived the ideologues,” should, according to Goldberg, “actually have led to a disconcerted silence” in the audience instead of jubilation. Fortunately, the young musicians and the public had a better understanding of the work.

The I, Culture Orchestra and Janáček’s “Taras Bulba”

Another highlight was the concert that presented works by Avet Terterian, Sergei Rachmaninoff and Leoš Janáček on August 20. When ZDF presenter Jo Schück remarked in his introduction about “culture being the foundation of the European Union” and went on to condemn recent attacks by right-wing extremists on refugee flats and hostels, his words were met with spontaneous applause.

The young musicians of the I, Culture Orchestra, under the direction of Ukrainian conductor Kirill Karabits and appearing for the first time at the Young Euro Classic, also notably refused to adapt to prevailing nationalistic currents in contemporary Germany. Established in 2011 on the occasion of the Polish presidency of the EU Council, the orchestra brings together musicians from Poland, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine.

Although the rulers of these countries attempt to incite anti-Russian sentiment in their populations, the orchestra put the rhapsody “Taras Bulba” (based on the novel by Russian writer Nikolai Gogol) by Leoš Janáček on the programme. The Czech composer wrote this work during the First World War, when he was a follower of Pan-Slavism, which strove for the unification of eastern European Slavic peoples under Russian hegemony.

Janáček’s music, with its uniquely lyrical musical language, harmonic and formal staccato and affecting drama, also reflects the experiences of the First World War, which eventually led to the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the sweeping away of the tsarist empire by the Russian Revolution.

The other concert works presented fascinating discoveries for the audience. First, there was the powerful 1975 Symphony No. 3 by the Armenian Avet Terterian, which broke all conventional standards and yet fascinated listeners with its dynamic tonal combinations of powerful outbursts of percussion, whispering wind timbres of the strings, plaintive Armenian zurnas (a kind of shortened oboe) and duduk woodwind flutes. And no less impressive were Rachmaninoff’s 24 Variations and his Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43 (1934), which pianist Alexander Gavrylyuk—born in the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv—played with a virtuosity that combined technical brilliance with a lushness of musicality and humour.

Finally, a question has to be raised concerning the Young Euro Classic’s motto, “Here we play out the future.” What future will this popular festival be confronting in coming years? Its clear commitment to opposing war and nationalism, and in favour of uniting the European population stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing political status quo. While music speaks its own language, the history of the 20th century has made clear that music too can ultimately fall victim to increasingly destructive international conflicts. German imperialism, in particular, exploited and abused its rich cultural heritage to gloss over its war crimes in the First and Second World Wars.

Today, the German government is again endeavouring to become the leading power in Europe and the world, and once again exploit culture and music for its own purposes. The foreign office’s website, for example, asserts: “In addition to political and economic relations, Foreign Cultural and Educational Policy (AKBP) constitutes the ‘third pillar’ of German foreign policy. It is one of its most enduring and most visible instruments.”

This is the same rationale behind the repeated abuse of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony by both Germany and the EU!

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