

Twenty years of the Young Euro Classic festival: Beethoven caught between rebellion and EU propaganda

By Verena Nees
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The 20th edition of the Young Euro Classic festival ended August 6 with a record attendance of 27,000 visitors. Over the course of two weeks acclaimed international orchestras gave a series of concerts in the Berlin Konzerthaus [concert hall] situated in the city's Gendarmenmarkt. Some 1,200 young musicians from all over the world took part in the 19 concerts.

The musical focus of the festival was Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). Next year marks the 250th anniversary of his birth and all nine of the German composer's symphonies were played in addition to a number of his other works.

The young artists interpreted this titan of classical music in their own fashion—without exaggerated pathos, but with great seriousness and respect. While technically not always flawless, they were clearly moved by and gave expression to the revolutionary spirit of Beethoven that has so much relevance today.

They “brought Beethoven to life,” as one visitor wrote succinctly in a guest book, following a performance by the Israeli-Palestinian Galilee Chamber Orchestra.

The Young Euro Classic festival was first established as a purely European youth orchestra event at the turn of the millennium based on the desire of its founding members and sponsors to provide a “sign for an open community, a sign for Europe.” The occasion was the end of the Cold War and all the accompanying illusions in a “new era” of peace and democracy to be promoted by the European Union (EU).

Since 2000, almost 25,000 young musicians and 200 orchestras from over 70 countries have played at the festival, which has long since been extended beyond Europe to other continents. The program has included more than 250 world and German premieres.

This year, in addition to many European orchestras, orchestras came from Chile, the Dominican Republic, Tatarstan, China, the US and Israel. A British ensemble made the point of contacting the festival's director and indicating their strong desire to participate in the Young Euro Classic before the Brexit deadline, since they don't know what will happen after it.

The festival was characterised by clear contradictions. Its themes of cosmopolitanism, humanity and tolerance are increasingly in conflict with the reality of the EU and the development of capitalism. Young musicians are largely responding with thoughtfulness and commitment, and their interpretations of classical music have clearly gained in depth. Many premieres had lost the character of mere sound experiments. On the other hand, the festival organisers visibly sought to conflate their own official motto with EU propaganda on the occasion of the festival's 20th anniversary.

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as a “sing-along concert” under EU

flags

It was no coincidence that the main event, featuring Beethoven's famed Symphony No. 9 in D Minor (1822-24), was organised as a “sing-along concert,” played by the European Union Youth Orchestra (EUYO) under the direction of Vasily Petrenko. The “Ode to Joy” based on the text by Friedrich Schiller at the end of the symphony provides the basis for the EU anthem.

The August 4 concert was broadcast to those outside on the Gendarmenmarkt, a major square in Berlin, where the crowd was encouraged to sing the “Ode to Joy” and raise their “voices for Europe.” The text of the piece had been distributed and a choirmaster led the singing, while festival officials waved EU flags.

Beethoven's revolutionary spirit, however, which drew its strength from the ideals of the French Revolution—“freedom, equality and fraternity,” could not be more removed from the current reality of the EU—extreme social inequality, nationalism, police rearmament, right-wing extremism, militarism and brutal anti-refugee policies.

At the festival two years ago, the National Portuguese Youth Orchestra interrupted an encore of the fourth movement of the Ninth Symphony before the beginning of the “Ode to Joy,” and addressed the audience. Due to EU austerity measures, the orchestra was probably performing for the last time, the musicians explained, adding: “We are for equality and against discrimination.” A year previously, the EUYO threatened to fall victim to EU austerity policies and was only rescued following a wave of protests from the music world.

German-Greek orchestra as another star turn

A second star turn of the festival was a performance by a specially founded German-Greek orchestra under the direction of the designated chief conductor of the Konzerthaus, Christoph Eschenbach, accompanied by two adult choirs.

Introducing the concert, Stefan Zierke (Social Democratic Party), Parliamentary State Secretary to the Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, boasted that the “terrific” German-Greek orchestral project proves that “Germany and Greece have a lot in common.” No doubt many Greek visitors would have recoiled at such remarks, above all, because EU austerity dictates enforced by the German finance ministry have had severe consequences for spheres of Greek culture. The budgets for theatres and the funds for music and art lessons in Greece have been radically reduced, and for a period even the country's state radio orchestra was forced out of commission.

Fortunately, the combined orchestra in Berlin, consisting of the Underground Youth Orchestra of Athens and the Julius Stern chamber music orchestra from the Berlin University of the Arts, was not deterred by such empty slogans. It won the hearts of audience members with works

by Christoph Willibald Gluck (from *Orpheus* and (overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus* and Choral Fantasia in C minor), Mikis Theodorakis (*Zorba's Suite*, based on music for the film *Zorba the Greek*) and Nikos Skalkottas (*Greek Dances*).

In particular, the two Greek soloists Stathis Karapanos (flute) and Fil Liotis (piano) were enthusiastically applauded for their performances and splendid encores.

“Alcance/Reach” from Portugal appeals for social interaction

Despite the obvious attempt by organizers not to rustle the feathers of festival sponsors from the EU, German foreign ministry and big business, music finds its own voice. There were some real jewels among the concerts, with many clearly expressing the widespread mood of opposition to official politics on the part of young people.

For example, the concert by the National Youth Orchestra of Portugal (JOP) under the direction of its conductor Pedro Carneiro, which had to fight for its funding again this year, included a political statement.

Portuguese composer João Godinho (born 1976) was the deserved recipient of the European Composers Award, given by an audience jury, for his work “Alcance / Reach” which premiered in Berlin.

In the midst of the orchestra, five musicians with disabilities played glockenspiel and other percussion instruments. With visible pleasure, they created sounds, rhythms and tones that added playful elements to the orchestral music. Godinho spent a year rehearsing the piece with them and members of the JOP using their own special sign language (sound painting).

At the end of the piece, the musicians distributed long rolls of paper with messages printed on them, which were unrolled by audience members from the front of the hall to the back. It was a powerful symbol of solidarity with the socially deprived.

The festival jury praised Godinho's work in a tribute as follows: “The mere fact that a composer undertakes to leave his familiar ‘métier’ and face new, completely different challenges is courageous and worthy of great respect.” One was “surprised, impressed and indeed moved.”

When the orchestra played Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 in A major (1811-12) mostly standing upright, the audience was jubilant. Beethoven wrote his beloved Seventh in opposition to Napoleon's Russia campaign. Played by the young Portuguese musicians with irrepressible joie de vivre, his “Battle Symphony” resonated like a revolt.

Israeli-Palestinian harmony from the Galilee Chamber Orchestra

Another highlight of the festival was the concert performed by the Galilee Chamber Orchestra, founded in 2012 and consisting in equal proportions of Israeli and Palestinian musicians. Born in Nazareth, Palestinian conductor Saleem Ashkar, who also performs as piano soloist, expressly pursues the goal of bridging the gap between Arabs and Jews via music.

Ashkar and his orchestra performed Joseph Haydn's dramatic overture to his opera *L'isola disabitata* (The Desert Island) and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major and Symphony No. 1 in C major with remarkable ease and in a thoroughly coordinated manner as though melded into one. The orchestra's message of reconciliation was unmistakable for any attentive listener.

The premiere of *Overcoming* by Palestinian composer Wisam Gibrán (also born in Nazareth), which he composed on the subject of “courage” for this year's Rheingau Musik Festival, also struck a profound note. Traditional motifs and melodies played on the oud, a lute-type stringed instrument popular in the Middle East and North Africa, combined with European compositional structures, convey something of the tragic history and struggle for survival—both of the Jewish population in the Holocaust and the postwar Palestinian population.

“A concert should mean something, it should stay in one's memory,

Euclidean, something subjective—it's not just about perfectly played music,” Ashkar explained. The performance by the orchestra at Young Euro Classic was fully successful in this respect.

It is striking that Peter Schäfer, the director of Berlin's Jewish Museum, located not far from the Gendarmenmarkt, was forced to resign this year because he pursued the same goals as Ashkar in his approach toward exhibition projects. The VIP “patron” of the concert, Deutschlandradio director Stefan Raue, made no mention of this scandal in his introductory comments.

Mahler's farewell to the old society—and his relevance today

The European Youth Orchestra (EUYO), which was to play the role of the “jubilee choir” [cheering squad] for the European Union on August 4 (and which was founded in 1976, long before the EU), played a very different programme two days earlier, one that came much closer to reflecting today's reality.

After Antonín Dvořák's melodic Cello Concerto in B minor with soloist Nicolas Altstaedt, the orchestra gave a thrilling performance of Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 5. Mahler began composing his piece in 1901 and it premiered in 1904, just a few years after the first performance of Dvořák's piece—and yet the scores are remarkably different.

Mahler's more than one-hour long, stirring composition was his swan song for the departing 19th century. The Adagietto became famous as the music suffusing Luchino Visconti's 1971 film version of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. The 140 young orchestra members, from all of the EU's 28 member countries, offered an utterly intimate interpretation, at times with an otherworldly clang. The delicate tones of string and harp provided brief interludes for the listener, before giving way to menacing marching themes, wild tutti chords, dissonances, key changes and contrasts of motif.

It may be that the current generation of musicians, born at the turn of the last century, feel close to Mahler and can play his Symphony No. 5 in such a moving fashion.

Is it not the case that a period of relative calm, reverie and illusion, echoed by Mahler, with waltz-type rhythms, cowbells and pastoral horns, is finally over? Instead have we not entered a period of turbulence, war and social upheaval, as Mahler captures so powerfully in his sweeping and furious orchestral surges?

The EUYO's young performers clearly had *this* Mahler coursing through their veins.

Prokofiev's “Victory of Humanity”

The festival ended with a tremendous concert by the National Youth Orchestra of the US (NYO-USA) conducted by Sir Antonio Pappano. The world premiere of the piece, *Delicate Tension*, by 19-year-old Tyson J. Davis, already made one's ears prick up. The US embassy commissioned Davis to write a composition on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Davis, however, was initially inspired by a painting by Wassily Kandinsky and said he had the relationship of the present time to that of the Cold War “in his mind's eye.”

The music was correspondingly ambiguous. Its alternating shimmering strings, brass glissandi and orchestral tutti, had more in common with the sound of war and bombing raids than with fall of the Berlin Wall and the accompanying propaganda about a new period of peaceful development.

The young American musicians, who appeared almost symbolically in red pants, ended their concert with an enthusiastic performance of Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major by Sergei Prokofiev (1944). After the victory of the Red Army on World War II, the work was premiered in Moscow in January 1945 to a cheering audience and celebrated as a symbol of mankind's victory over a barbaric regime.

Today, 75 years after the end of the war, the work continues to resonate and was greeted jubilantly by the audience. The youthful US orchestra

played the gloomy marching rhythms of the slow movement and the following exuberant celebrations of victory with great intensity and passion. It's not the case, of course, that every member of the orchestra has a grasp of—or even registers—the current dangers of war and fascism in political terms. However, by participating in this strong performance, they oppose through music the current warmongering and barbarism and express the desire for humanity and peace.

The following concerts were recorded and can be heard here:

European Union Youth Orchestra (EUYO) plays Mahler

National Youth Orchestra of the USA (NYO-USA)

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