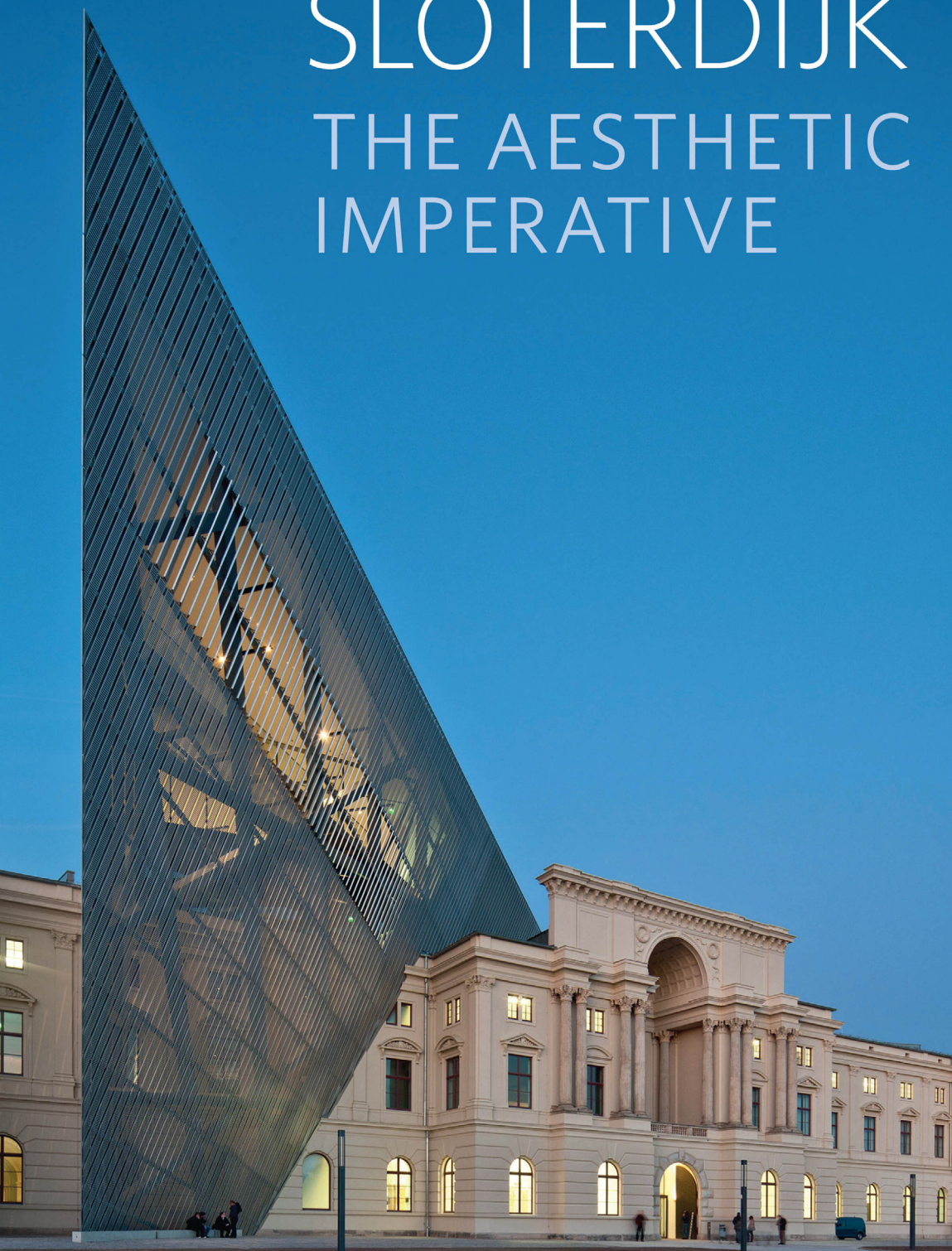


PETER SLOTERDIJK THE AESTHETIC IMPERATIVE



The Aesthetic Imperative

Peter Sloterdijk

The Aesthetic Imperative

Writings on Art

Edited and with an Afterword by Peter Weibel

Translated by Karen Margolis

polity

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I

WORLD OF SOUND

LA MUSIQUE RETROUVÉE

Demonic Territory

Ladies and gentlemen,¹ abundant attempts have been made to define the essence of music. Some people have described it as structured time or as a synthesis of calculated order and mysterious caprice, while others have seen its higher manifestations as the meeting between rigorous form and the gestures of free self-expression, or simply as passion colliding with the world of numbers. Yet none of these statements can match the famous dictum of Thomas Mann in his novel *Doctor Faustus*. Inspired by Kierkegaard, Mann reached the conclusion that ‘Music is demonic territory.’

This phrase, which has since become a mantra for musicologists, is notable for several reasons; moreover, it increasingly requires comment. When it first appeared in 1947 it merely aimed at illuminating the murky secrets of German culture, an area where, it was said, musicality and bestiality had become confusingly intertwined. At the same time, Mann’s dictum was supposed to indicate how, on the ground of modernism, artistically beautiful things could change into things that are artistically evil, and how diabolical guile could transform the best forces of a high civilization into their opposite. From today’s perspective, Mann’s statement has a special impact in that it replaces a definition with a warning – as if the author wanted to admit that it is impossible for some topics to lead to objective theory because they do not remain still while they are being worked on by theory. Instead, sleeping lurking monsters rouse from their slumbers and rear their heads as soon as we talk about them. According to the author of *Doctor Faustus*, musicologists would be well advised to study the conclusion of Christian demonologists that demons are

not neutral. Instead of being model objects that can be investigated at a safe distance, they are a power that responds to invocation. Anyone who calls the dark spirit by name has already invoked him, and the invoking person should be aware that he can be confronted with an authority that will be stronger than he is. That is why folk tales say of Doctor Faust: *If you know something, keep it quiet.*

Let us briefly look at which kind of demonic possession is involved when we enter the territory of music – assuming that this is about a ‘territory’ that can be entered like a ground or terrain. We must seek the answer in the acoustic anthropology that has acquainted us with a large number of inspiring new findings on human hearing in recent decades. They have taught us that among members of *Homo sapiens*, like other mammals or creatures that bear live offspring, and even among many birds, hearing is an ability that is acquired very early, actually in prenatal space. The ear is indisputably the leading organ of human contact with the world, and this is already the case at a point in the organism’s development when the individual as such is not yet ‘there’ – to the extent that the adverb ‘there’ indicates the possibility that a person is at a sufficient distance from things to be able to point to an object or circumstance. Even in adults, hearing is not so much an effect the subject experiences in relation to a source of sound, but occurs rather as immersion of the sensitive organ and its owner in an acoustic field. This applies even more strongly to the hearing of the unborn child. If the first auditory experience signifies a foetal prelude to the mature use of the acoustic sense, it is mainly because at that moment the feature of floating in a total environment is at its purest. The first hearing experience inherently resembles a pre-school of cosmopolitanism, literally of world openness – yet we attend this school, effectively the *école maternelle*, at a stage of life when we ourselves are still completely worldless and pre-worldly. The individual-to-be persists as far as possible in its intimate reserve, enclosed in a warm misty night, yet still listening behind the door of existence. But it would be confusing to describe the hearing foetus merely as an eavesdropper behind the door. The primal hearer’s way of being is defined from the very beginning by its embedding in an internal sonorous continuum dominated by two emanations from its maternal surroundings: first, the sounds of the mother’s heart that set the existential beat like a constant repetitive rhythm; and, second, her voice producing free prose that impregnates the foetal ear with a melodic dialect. These two universal factors of the formation of intra-uterine hearing, the cardiac *basso continuo* and the mother’s soprano speaking voice, create the outline of the utopian continent of proto-music or endo-music, and we first have to overcome the almost constant presence of these two factors

to reach a horizon within which more unfamiliar, more intense and more distant sonic events communicate a kind of acoustic summer lightning coming from the world.

In the future we have to take these relationships into account when repeating the phrase about music as demonic territory. The nature of the demonic musical phenomenon will be easier to understand when we accept that once the auditory relation to the world becomes musical, we are in a position to address the register of deep regressions. From this it follows that, even in the case of adult subjects filled with harsh reality, music can still evoke their intimate prehistories. It recalls a phase of their development when they were not yet accustomed to being free to take their distance from things and situations, but still, the environment with its lively sounds transported them into a mode of conflict-free encirclement. At the same time, music, wherever it activates registers of intensity, can render the dynamic of earlier struggles to break through and find new openings as acoustic patterns. This locates music as the place where the transition from confrontation to immersion is continually articulated in a new way. The musical ear is the organ that participates in the reality of sound and tonal events exclusively in the mode of immersion. In fact, immersion as such is the topic of a more audacious kind of Enlightenment. If you know something, then you should talk about it nonetheless. This is probably what Nietzsche had in mind when he added the hazardous name of Dionysus to the vocabulary of musicology.

We still have to explain the ways and means by which the ear becomes a musical ear. Musicality in the narrow sense of the word assumes that the adult ear can occasionally take a holiday from the trivial work of hearing and be lured away from everyday noise by select sounds. We generally experience the world as a place completely removed from music. It is the noises of our surroundings that dominate in this world – and, above all, the inescapable chatter of our fellow human beings, which the media amplify to the maximum nowadays, and then the daily noise profile with the acoustic signatures of our households, our workplaces and our traffic systems. As a result the human ear is a slavish, servile and secretarial organ because, to begin with, it can only bow to the authority of the first available sounds around it. Unmusicality is the voice of the Lord, and the reality of things tells us to understand in an unmusical tone of command. Music, by contrast, has the intrinsic effect of carrying us away. It invites us to start over again with a different kind of response – and this implies, however obliquely, the return to the realm of the heartbeat and the archaic soprano. It is nearly impossible to fathom the implications of these anthropological

observations with all their immense consequences. The prose of ordinary existence is based on the fact that from birth onwards, human children make a trivial but incredible discovery: the world is a still, hollow place in which the heartbeat and the primal soprano are catastrophically silenced. Existence in the lighted world is connected to a forcible loss we can never really fathom: for humans, from the first moment on, being in the world involves the unreasonable demand that we do without the sonic continuity of that initial intimacy. From this time on, silence transmits the alarm signal of being. Only the mother's voice, which can be heard from outside, builds a precarious bridge between then and now. Because this renunciation is nearly impossible to accept, the being that has just arrived in the world has the task of overcoming the prosaic barrier that divides it from the sphere of sonorous enchantments. Music exists because human beings are creatures that insist on wanting to have the best once again. All music, including elementary or primitive music, begins wholly under the auspices of rediscovery and repetition obsession. The specific allure of musical art, right up to its supreme structures and including its moments of evidentness, of being carried along, and of joyful astonishment, is linked to retrieving a sonorous presence we believed to be forgotten. When music is most like itself, it speaks to us as *musique retrouvée*.

After the ear's exodus into the outer world, everything revolves around the art of repairing the broken link to our first bonding. But we can only recover the essence of this incomparably intimate and entirely individual relationship later on in the public sphere where cultural groups listen to sounds together. The rule for this turn to the public and cultural sphere is that what began in enchantment should return in freedom. What we call nations, and later 'societies', are always sonorous constructions as well – I describe them elsewhere as the phonotope² –, each of which solves the task by its own way of embedding its members' ears in a shared world of sound and noise. Public hearing is a means to offer substitutes to its members for the lost paradise of intimate audial perception. This allows an interpretation of the 'homeland effect' – because the word 'homeland' primarily evokes an acoustic impact that activates the obsessive liaison between ear, community and landscape. Recent generations of musical theorists have correctly interpreted what the localized and socialized ear routinely hears as bias in a typically local sound landscape, alias *soundscape*. There was an erroneous attempt to give this sound environment a direct musical meaning – I say erroneous, because at best the daily sound milieus show semi-musical qualities, whereas authentic music only begins where the mere hearing of sounds ends. We can confirm this for ourselves by

observing how the modern music industry, as a pure sound industry, spreads the plague behind the smokescreen of folk music and causes epidemics behind the smokescreen of pop music – things we can only regard as acoustic counterparts to Spanish flu, and against which no effective medicine has yet been found.

If we accept these conclusions, we realize immediately why the way to music is inseparably linked to reclaiming the individuality and intimacy of hearing. As we have noted, this restitution can only happen in a roundabout way through public sound events and at the level of technical methods. In this sense we can say that participation in civilization means being on the path to individuated music. This statement gives an idea of the scope of the adventure that the composers and musicians of European modernity embarked on when they set out to discover the new lands of audible structures.

In the Curvature of the World

Let us reaffirm what we have just stated: civilization, in the higher sense of the term, is the process during which opportunities for individualization are released, including those that promote an intimate atmosphere of listening for adult members of a nation with a particular culture. This immediately reveals the tension that arises between the demands of individualized adult existence and its tendency towards intimacy. It is this tension that leads to music being described as demonic territory. Individualization includes musicalization. This involves the fact that individuals are increasingly able to tap into the conditions of music in terms of flow, reception and media, regardless of whether we understand them as pre-subjective or pre-objective, so that the entirely musicalized person, the ultimate educational product of European modernity, would also be the person who can handle work and conflict skilfully and, moreover, has the most profoundly developed freedom for regression. Whatever the case with such psychagogic³ idealizations, it makes sense to speak of a development of music only within the context that combines availability of instruments and processes with abandonment to the flow that carries one away. In fact, this is the only context in which it makes sense to speak of a history of music oriented to trends, and finally of the part that musical productions have played in the inventions, discoveries and research of modern times.

We cannot refer to the concept of modern times without mentioning Jacob Burckhardt's resonant formulation that the culture of the Renaissance consisted of 'the discovery of the world and of man'.⁴

The classical approach has the virtue of understanding the process of modernity generally as an outward turn. A mind that is serious about research always wants to 'go towards things'. New countries only exist in cases where the inhabitants of old, inward-looking cantons wake up and embrace extraversion. From this perspective, the new music that has been articulated since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries stands side by side with the expansionism of European cultures of competence as a whole. Just as the clear notation of the maps of seamen who regularly crossed the oceans since Columbus made it possible to navigate previously unpredictable seas, the new maps of musicians charted the written scores, the journeys of the voices in the space of tonal events, for future vocal and instrumental movements. In both cases, nautical or musical enterprises were wholly aimed at being repeatable, and what the investments of shipping owners and their timetables achieved in the one case was echoed by the business of courtly, clerical and bourgeois performance and staging in the other. The new, modern aspect of authentic modernity lies in the fact that it simultaneously secured and extended the radius of supply – if civilization is on the way to music, music is on the way to virtuosity. In this respect it is united with technology in movement. That it has been handed down through generations of accomplished musicians encourages the chronic willingness to move on from what has already been achieved to what still has to be achieved. If the stock of competence did not incorporate the previous achievements, it would not be possible to develop anticipation, preliminary knowledge and advance intentions to guide the next steps. Conversely, if no consciousness had been created about living on a continent that is now called the Old World (for good reason), there would not yet be a coast from which people could make their own plans and attempt to set out for the New World.

Part of the constitutive experiences of the modern age is that we cannot discover the world without experiencing the curvature of the world at the same time. In speaking of the curvature of the world, we are borrowing a speculative phrase that Thomas Mann used to characterize the paradoxical – or dialectical, if you like – interaction and intertwining of constructivism and primitivism in early twentieth-century music.⁵ It is a phrase involving Freud's and Rank's suggestive psychoanalysis just as much as Einstein's doctrine of the curvature of universal space. It is saying that there is no exit into the unknown that does not have consequences sooner or later for the way the person on the outward journey feels about him- or herself. The same applies to elementary manoeuvres such as Magellan's first circumnavigation of the earth and more subtle excursions such as

those made by modern physicists, systems operators and biologists to reach the last particles of material and the complex structures of the brain, the genome, the immune system and biotopes. In both of these cases the outward turn causes shifts in the identity of the discoverer.

We still have every reason to remember the following picture as a founding scene of the modern age: on 22 September 1522 the *Victoria*, the last of five ships that had set sail under Magellan's command three years earlier on a journey on the western route to the legendary Spice Islands, arrived back in the port of San Lucar de Barrameda in Andalusia. On board were eighteen half-starved figures who were promptly put in penitents' chains and led into the cathedral of Seville. A *Te Deum* struck up for the unprecedented return – profoundly justified, we realize, because after the completion of this oceanic loop nothing could ever be the same again in relation to the world picture. The people who discovered that the earth was completely curved had paid a high price for their experience. Out of two hundred and eighty men, only the eighteen mentioned above returned to their home port as the first eyewitnesses of globalization. Each man was drenched in the horror of the meaning of world openness, of what it meant to be open to the world, stamped forever with the memory of epic tortures and many miraculous rescues. We can still read about this today in the laconic entries in Pigafetta's ship's log. At the same time each of the returnees must have felt the irony of homecoming in his own way. Anyone who went through the whole process and returned to his starting point saw it with different eyes forever after. His home town was no longer the egoistic epicentre of life that arranged the world around itself like a periphery that became increasingly indifferent the further away it was; it was no longer the hub of the universe resting in comfortable ignorance. It became a point in a turbulent grid and a node in a mesh composed of transport routes, flows of goods and currents of news. The full representation of the curvature of the earth on the new world globes, those effective media of the modern age, signalled the beginning of the continuing crisis of the homeland triggered by the changes in the self-image of those who stayed behind, perpetually wavering between fascination and repulsion as they absorbed the news from the new territory of the earth.

It is not hard to see that the nautical evidence for the global shape of the earth was only a first step. The adventure of extraversion revealed its true dimensions the moment the outward turn was also transposed into an inward turn. The process revealed a curvature of being that leads us towards a deeper irony of research. Anyone who stays focused strictly on the course and single-mindedly dedicates

themselves to the search for the hidden structures of the real world must realize sooner or later that they are operating on themselves and their own background. In its advanced state of progress, the 'discovery of the world and of man' that was begun under an Apollonian sun turned out to be an enterprise in which the world ceased to resemble its inhabitants' own familiar home. The bias of the Greeks and the ancients towards an existence in which the universe inherently addressed mortals in terms of domesticity gradually lost its hold on affairs. Wherever research becomes radical, the living being becomes estranged and alienated in the total picture. Humans see themselves as beings that increasingly have an uncanny feeling of not being at home. This feeling means that the presence of restless, insatiable strangeness, even at our own front door, can no longer be ignored.

We have known since Heidegger that the curvature of being must be understood as the curvature of time. What we call human existence is not a straight line between the beginning and the end. Rather, the existential line is bent by a strange kind of tension: the 'ends of the parabola' that define a single life mark out segments in the circle of Being. At least this is the teaching of the most resolute Western metaphysical thinkers from Parmenides to the Master of Meßkirch.⁶ They had their reasons for persistently returning to intensive study of the circle or the sphere as figures. According to this way of thinking, origin and future should merge into each other in immense curves, or emanate from separate sources. It is this bold speculation to which Serenus Zeitblom gave a new tone in his apologetic commentary on the 'Apocalypse', the major work of the composer Adrian Leverkühn, a work that was allegedly barbaric and over-intellectualized, when he remarked that the 'union of the oldest and the newest' had been achieved in this horrifyingly modern artistic construct. He went on to say that this approach 'by no means' represented 'an arbitrary act', but was part of 'the nature of things': 'It rests, I might say, on the curvature of the world, which makes the last return unto the first.'⁷

Departure to the Musical Treasure Island: Caliban's Legacy

In the light of the above we can begin to see that the history of music is closely related in its own way to the departure of modern, enterprising, inventive humans for new shores. Music is very often invoked to portray the curvature of the world in its own specific fashion but rarely does so intelligently. It expresses this curvature according to its demonic nature by articulating the curved temporality of human existence.

Having said this, it takes little extra effort to explain plausibly why music had to become the real religion of the modern age – beyond any confessional schisms and sectarian splits. If religion has always offered more or less profound interpretations of the inexorable return of the mortal person to the unborn, the emergence of modern music created a powerful alternative to give this dynamic of return a safe and secure setting. In fact, modern music is more religious than religion because its privileged alliance with the latent faculties of hearing allows it to reach into our inner depths, the layers where we hardly ever encounter simple religiosity. The basis of modern music's great advantage over religion is that music acquires an annunciatory power that conventional religiosity still barely understands, even today. (This has been particularly true ever since the change in music from polyphony to forms of chord-based expression, and the transition from composing under categorical laws to free composition of tonal events determined by the composer's own programme.)

From the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onwards, the intrinsic essential dynamic of higher music has made it irresistibly effective, because it was in the process of evolving a superior kind of eloquence in relation to questions of paradise or, more generally, of tension and relaxation. It shared this only, if at all, with modern poetry, which, ever since the age of Goethe and Eichendorff and of Lermontov and Lamartine, has not hidden its ambition of vying for the ear of the musicalized person. Consequently, since the days of the first Vienna classics, music in its enhanced form has opened up an endless tonal conversation on the difference between paradise and the world. Music's superiority resides in the fact that its sole task is to address the ear – the ear that, as we know today, uses the memory of its own internal constitution to construct the place of differentiation between the world and the pre-world. We can estimate the greatness of modern music and its solidarity with the project of modernity if we recognize it as the medium of a powerful relation to the world that nonetheless does not deny the call of the deep. The adventurous heart of modernity throbs in the medium of music. If religion in its ordained form had to rescue human souls from earthly life and its depredations by regularly promoting retreat from obsessive worldly cares and even escapism, flight from the world, the music of modern times had the merit that it created a transitional medium in which the unrenounceable rights of regression and remembrance of the primal pre-worldly wounded state were tempered with the sense of self-development and love of the world.

The 'project of modernity', and the solidarity of music with this project – it may be appropriate to conclude by briefly explaining

these dubious terms. In fact, what right would we have to speak of an era called the modern age if we weren't saying that this was the time when people in the West began restructuring their desires? For the Renaissance truly to become an age of discovery it had to define itself as a great turning point for human aspirations. To sum up, what was always important for the people of modern times from then on, whatever their own pronouncements on their latest goals, was to redirect the arrow of desire away from the goals of the nether world towards objects this side of paradise, objects that were attainable and enjoyable in their own lifetime. The geographical symbol for this turn is called America, the fictional symbol is *Treasure Island* and the mythological symbol is the goddess Fortuna. To be sure, since time immemorial people from the Western cultural context saw the striving of a bad 'here' for a good 'there' as healthy and rational, even if for the foreseeable future the 'there' was only attainable in the heaven of the Holy Trinity. The centuries following Columbus's journeys made Europeans into treasure hunters, not just incidentally and occasionally but principally and constitutively. Treasure hunting has been the real metaphysical activity of the European psyche since the discovery of the continents beyond the ocean.

The image of treasure involves the idea of the magnetic object that shares a common trait with the demonic: it does not stay still while it is being turned into theory. It is impossible to imagine the treasure without starting to look for it, and it would be impossible to look for it without already being caught by its allure. It is enough to describe the world as a place where treasures can be found to turn oneself instantly into a seeker, no longer in the sense of the transcendent and masochistic quest for God but in the sense of the modern, aesthetic-magical-economic enterprise. Being an entrepreneur means adjusting from reward in a nether world to expectation of profit in this world. The treasure hypothesis provides justification for the hybrid courage with which people of the modern era approached the vast expanse of the world and the earth. In the future the only meaning of new territory could be that it contained the possibility of treasure caves. When we suddenly praise the new, it is because it is linked with the human right of finding. Finding the treasure means providing evidence that nobody is happy for the wrong reason. Conceiving happiness implies believing that the coincidence of justice and favouritism is possible, and not just possible but legitimate.

New territory: this term shows the spirit of utopia in its true colours; it is also the spirit of risk. That makes it sound like a gospel in the guise of geography. Believing in it means being convinced

that treasures lie waiting on distant shores, on hitherto inaccessible islands, in nature's nocturnal workshops, in glowing flasks, in glittering grottoes, waiting for their finders. They lie waiting thanks to a primal accumulation of means of happiness, and we still know too little about their origin, production and distribution; they are waiting because no luck exists that does not already have its eye on the person it will favour. Where Fortune returns, Fortunatus is on the spot – the man who has specialized in taking gifts from capricious hands.⁸ This is why Fortunatus was the first artists' name of the modern age. Fortune's treasures are *a priori* haloes that would be happy to decorate a wearer's head as soon as they identify themselves as a finder.

Having said this, and having issued the requisite warnings, we can give the idea a final twist to suggest how the musicians of modern times could become agents of the treasure hunt. It is obvious why they did not board ships to reach treasure islands. They used different maps from sailors and drew other coastlines to represent their America. The true, interior America attracts composers as soon as they set off, seeking and finding in another way, to discover the melodious treasure caves. But the artists themselves first had to produce what they found there. What they retrieved had never existed before they found it.

To conclude, I would like to suggest that it was Shakespeare in his island play *The Tempest* who first touched on these dangerous liaisons between the New World of sound and the New World illuminated by treasures. The chief witness of this discovery is none other than the original inhabitant of the exquisite island that, thanks to wizardry (what today we call technology), has become Prospero's empire – an aboriginal named Caliban whom one of the visitors, with colonial arrogance, calls a 'mooncalf', a 'stinking fish' and 'most ignorant monster', a Caribbean Papageno, a natural human and original proletarian who possesses, however, a privilege that the stiff new masters of the world can only hazily imagine. He has the prerogative of living in the midst of Nature that is producing sounds for the first time – and of observing from this vantage point the fabrications of higher culture with a mixture of scepticism, astonishment, submissiveness and rebellion. The lines that Shakespeare gave to his amphibian monster who was born yet unborn, who was entirely human and entirely an artist, should be studied as the permanent manifesto of the New Music:

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments

Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices,
That, if I then had wak'd after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me; that, when I wak'd, I cried to dream
again.⁹

This description created a misunderstanding that still lingers on in today's music business. Stefano, the pretender who claimed power on the island, drew an ominous conclusion from what he heard: without further ado, he believed Caliban's description of the melodious treasure island as the picture of a territory, a domain, a comfortable palace, in which musical servants performed their duties. This explains the staid, thoroughly feudal and thoroughly bourgeois conclusion:

This will prove a brave kingdom to me, where I shall have my
music for nothing.

Ladies and gentlemen, centuries have passed since this prophetic dialogue. The Calibans and Stefanos still meet up now and again to discuss this peculiar and strange island realm. These gatherings, which are usually held in summertime, are conventionally called festivals nowadays, but it would make more sense to see them as constitutive assemblies. They are concerned with the musical constitution of the world. Acute observers are doubtful that a common statement will emerge from this in the foreseeable future. The advocates of the Calibans persist with their argument that music is demonic territory; the Stefano fans stick to their position that if music cannot be entirely for free, at least its costs should be reduced. People still scarcely realize how the curvature of the world also affects the realm of values. Here, under the festive umbrella of a music event, we are still giving voice to the idea that nothing should be as valuable as the thing we want to have for free again from the moment of birth onward.

REMEMBRANCE OF BEAUTIFUL POLITICS

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to begin this brief rhetorical prelude to the performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony by the Hamburg State Philharmonic Orchestra on this 3rd of October in the year 2000 by saying that nobody could feel how strange this attempt is to combine speech and music as much as the present speaker. It seems to me we might even suspect the concert organizers of a lapse in good manners or an attack on the fundamental right of music to speak for itself in its own way. Since when has a major orchestra found it necessary to have its programme moderated by a verbal commentary? Since when have musical compositions had to accept sharing the stage with extra elements far removed from music? This kind of enterprise can only be justified by its connection with the date, the 3rd of October, the Day of National Unity in Germany. It is the day that marks the creation of the political union between the two German states that emerged from the dramatic events of the mid-twentieth century. It is, in fact, a public holiday that enshrines a political memory, and a day on which the majority of German citizens find remarkably little to celebrate, as we can see from the routine speeches of the class in this country that is obligated to celebrate anniversaries. It is a day on which the best thing people could probably do is to play Beethoven – as they are doing here and most likely elsewhere at this moment – the Beethoven of the Ninth Symphony, of course, a piece that imposes itself because it has been regarded for centuries as a concentrated expression of the culture of political celebration. This is why the chosen combination of speech and music here today is not just superficial, and more than a whim of the organizers. The Ninth Symphony, particularly its world-famous final chorus, represents an event of musical rhetoric;

indeed, of musical politics in its own right. Because of this, it is not a serious breach, in respect of either the situation or the genre, if, before the performance begins, we say a few preliminary words of comment and reflection, words that concern not the musical but (if we can express it like this) the ideological score of the work.

It is enough to recall the reasons why, following its triumphal premiere in Vienna in the year 1824, the Ninth Symphony went on to become the most famous and most influential musical composition of the modern age. The reasons for its almost numinous and precarious success (precarious because it is so excessive) can be found not least in the fact that it has an inherently appealing character, certainly at the conscious points, the vocal points, which is designed to harmonize with ideas beyond music, to support enthusiastic consensus, to make an overwhelming impression through a political programme. It is worth noting that even the nineteenth century could hardly have dreamed that this wave of musical-political consensus would keep rolling on so powerfully. It is no coincidence that after the final chorus of the Ninth Symphony was selected as the European anthem at the beginning of the 1970s, the United Nations also chose the piece as its theme tune. In other words, even if it is true that you can't speak with great music as such, the thematic excesses of Beethoven's 'political cantata' definitely tend towards using speech as an additional element.

In what follows I would like to take the liberty of remembering the historical premises of the musical-semantic complex that gave rise to the Ninth Symphony and its Ode to Joy. The word 'remembrance' is particularly apt here because we need to start speaking again about largely forgotten relationships. If we want to imagine ourselves at the generating pole of Beethoven's artistic achievement, it is necessary, to quote Hegel, to imagine a 'state of the world' [*Weltzustand*] when consensus was still called enthusiasm. At that time ordinary citizens were less concerned with sharing the same opinion than with being moved. Remembrance is necessary to be able to return in our imagination to the situation in which the progressive voices of society were obliged to present almost everything they had to say in an anticipatory fashion – unless they quickly found reasons to sidestep into idealized bygone periods. We must take a fresh look at a period in which a rising elite had developed the habit of thinking in sweeping terms. We have to think back to a phase of history in which individuals with their ability to dream for themselves became mediators of what they saw as dreams for humankind.

Prior to its victory, bourgeois culture spoke an enthusiastic dialect in the same way that today's globalization consultants rehearse the dialect of visions and missions when talking to their clients.

It would take too long to elucidate the meaning of enthusiasm in philosophical, psychological and systemic terms, but we can say that this honed notion of political Platonism has played a key role in the self-motivation of bourgeois societies that were keen to explore new shores. It contained the barely hidden categorical imperative of confidence at work. It helped to groom the middle social layer that was interested in power by enabling it to present itself directly as humankind in general. Enthusiasm from a bourgeois perspective is always a delirious fantasy of inclusiveness. It goes hand in hand with the prerogative of having had no experience of one's own – not with oneself, not with the institutional spirit, and certainly not with the game rules of economic relations governed by money. It reflects the state of grace that hovers over those who have not yet attained power – the grace of good conscience in a situation that lacks complexity. This blessed, powerful state of inexperience is the natural tone of the young Friedrich Schiller – the tone in which in 1785, when he was barely 26 years old, he wrote the prime document for the future politics of enthusiasm, the *Ode to Joy*, in whose success curve we are trying to find a little niche for ourselves, on this particular day.

It is Hölderlin, however, who gives us the clearest and the most disturbingly beautiful testimony in the German tradition in his pre-political reference to a vaguely imagined totality in the distant past. His epistolary novel *Hyperion*, written between 1792 and 1799, is set against the background of the Russian–Turkish war of 1770. It tells the story of the fateful involvement of the young Greek Hyperion in the initial stages of the freedom struggle of the Greeks against the Ottoman Empire. Even at that time the question of the spirit of Europe was already linked to what would later be called the Oriental question. There is no Western community of values without an eastern border. Hyperion's explanation to his girlfriend Diotima as to why he felt compelled to volunteer alongside his friends as a soldier in this necessary war expresses the crucial statements of the early bourgeois politics of enthusiasm with an unsurpassed clarity. Hyperion's appeal culminates in the proposition:

The new union of spirits cannot live in the air, the sacred theocracy of the Beautiful must dwell in a free state, and that state must have a place on earth, and that place we shall surely conquer.¹

These rarely quoted lines are truly momentous for our times. They are the key to the Beautiful Politics, the ideas without which we human beings would scarcely be able to comprehend the dramas

of the past two centuries – and yet those born later usually know nothing of the existence and use of these ideas. This politics has the right to be called beautiful to the extent that, to speak in Kantian terms, ‘it is acknowledged as the subject of a necessary aesthetic delight’ beyond its moral value; and the beautiful may be called political because it is driven by hunger for realization, or, to quote Marx, for praxis. In this case, the pattern of theory and practice that later became influential is prefigured in the relationship of script and staging or war plan and military campaign. Beauty awakens from a swoon and takes command in the real world. Later generations are usually unaware of this formation because the separation of the spheres of power, art and religion has largely become a self-evident fact and it is hard to think of any reasons to change that. In a society defined by differentiation between subsystems, nothing is more embarrassing and damaging than this meshing and coalescing of dimensions or arrangements when we have long been convinced that they coexist closely but neither can nor should ever achieve fusion. Yet what else was enthusiasm in its heroic, naïve phase but the general matrix of embarrassing situations that emerged from unpolitical politics, from people’s gushing embrace of the universe and the relentless equation of the bourgeoisie and humankind?

All the same, as long as we keep Hyperion’s argument in mind, we may suspect that Immanuel Kant had already lost sight of the main fact of the aesthetics of his time when he set out in his *Critique of Judgment* to confine the Beautiful solely to the borders of the arts. Kant said, ‘There is no science of the beautiful [*das Schöne*] but only critique; and there is no fine [*schön*] science but only fine art.’² Kant’s objective of assigning beautiful things – and their producers, the geniuses – to a circumscribed field of play, a specialized region for art, made him miss the *modus operandi* of the age of enthusiasm, a large part of which coincided with his own lifetime. It blinded him to the highly conspicuous phenomenon that in his era, more than ever before or afterwards, not only beautiful art had existed but also beautiful physics, beautiful medicine, beautiful politics, indeed, even beautiful religion – however dubious and unsustainable those hybrid forms might have been. All this deregulated beauty is an outpouring of the politics of the beautiful soul that plunges into the general and oncoming stream, exhilarated by its capacity to expand and its desire to present postulates and by its universal inclusiveness that has yet to be tested by history. Enthusiasm appears as meta-competence in reaching out for real things; it wants to be the medium that is the message, and rightly so, because anybody who is enthusiastic is enthusiastic most of all about being enthusiastic. Enthusiasm is presented as the ability to infect reality with beauty.

At this point I shall mention that it required a hundred and fifty years of sobering down before the operative part of this programme was ready to be put on the agenda again – this time under the heading of Design.

To repeat my thesis, the fact that we can only fleetingly mention the existence of Beautiful Politics here implies that remembrance of an epoch which now seems far away – a time which would later be called German Idealism – was nothing more than an initial approach, a pretension or, as sceptics were already saying at the time, an excess, an upsurge of emotion that is demanding and therefore dangerous enough to try to become a reality. From a philosophical perspective, idealism was a logical and ethical ambition that did not shrink from any limits; in other words, the paradoxical enterprise of making freedom the central theme of a rigidly formed system. We should not forget what idealism was supposed to be in its most morally plausible and most socially futile dimension: the attempt of middle-class people to attain gentrification because they stubbornly believed that it was an indispensable qualification for legitimate claims to exercise of power. Idealism sought to make itself indispensable as a process of proof that bourgeois forces were also fit for and worthy of power as long as they could succeed in being part of a historically new type of aristocracy. The aristocracy should no longer be a state of the realm, but a propulsion system. We are talking about the aristocracy of enthusiasm for noble or, in other words, universal emancipatory goals relevant to humanity. Idealism emerged on this basis as the attempt to give pride of place to the world as a whole, a place with an ontologically ambitious name, that of the ‘subject’. The subject means the thing that is at the base – or, in modern terms, what basically *does things*, what achieves everything ‘at the base’ of every situation. This kind of thinking makes the highest appear like the broadest. What used to be at the top should now be something everybody is entitled to. What used to be the highest title has become the general style and an everyday form of address. It follows that the secret of the politics of enthusiasm is that it raises the whole of society to the level of the aristocracy – or, as Schiller said in the first version of the *Ode to Joy*, beggars would be brothers of princes. But if we’re talking about *noblesse oblige*, it applies even more to the subject. Nothing is more of a strain than being a principle oneself. Sometimes the subject, the everyday species, is presented as the productivity that posits the world [*weltsetzend*], that immediately encounters reality; and sometimes it is presented as free will without frontiers and finally as the capacity for universal brotherhood. The latter concept suggests the goodwill to create a single unified network of family,

communication and life with everything that is human and to speak, or, rather, to sing, with a single voice, a voice of the species. This is a fine, if intolerant, dream of inclusion whose tracks we can follow through two centuries up to the washed-out late German idealism of recent Critical Theory.

Idealism as a form of enthusiasm for the species has an intrinsic impulse we could call the politics of choruses. Indeed, from this perspective, what are bourgeois societies but political music societies in which every member has a voice – a voice whose true definition is found in consonance, in agreement on existence in the long view, in the human species and its divinely ordained sections, the nations? Perhaps what Schiller set out to express in his *Ode to Joy* is only meaningful in the context of such melodious totalities. Only when nations become choirs of their own accord, choirs waiting for the musical notes – and political idealism is, perhaps, nothing but the decision not to doubt this –, can there be hope of enthusiasm, or ‘joy’ in Schiller’s terminology, triumphing against the divisive forces that are now (rather shallowly) called fashion, whereas we know, to the contrary, that they define valuable successful principles of modern society. In fact, nothing less than magic will be enough to bind what has divided society. It must have been a magic spell that stopped society’s subsystems on their way to dividing even further. Moreover, without magic, how can millions of people be guaranteed to keep calm when poets propose embracing? Without magic, how can we accept that the world is something we reach by a kiss? To repeat, however: what is idealism but this last indulgence in a pre-technological relationship to the universal? This kiss of the whole world! It would still be relevant – but not until communications technology was advanced enough to provide every household with remote kissing connections. But what are we supposed to think about an author who wants to suggest to his ‘brothers’, who are, presumably, enlightened readers, that there must be a loving Father living above the starry firmament? From where, we may ask, did the young idealist Schiller get this heavenly tent, the old firmament, which by his time had already been an obsolete cosmological notion for two hundred years? Where did he get the loving Father, when neither his own nor the sovereign could act as models? Hadn’t he just fled from the duke, from Mannheim to Dresden to his friend Körner?³ Joy alone made such things possible; it was the agent of higher cohesion and thicker mists; it obtained what no longer appeared accessible; the mail order company ‘Joy’ was known for its super-fast deliveries.

Ladies and gentlemen, the point of these remembrances is not to present Beautiful Politics for retrospective mockery. I am rather

emphasizing its astonishing quality and economic potential, and focusing on its seduction, which is barely imaginable today. It is only possible now, from this great historical distance, to estimate how many autohypnotic routines were needed at the time to sing of joy as the medium of total unification in the way that young Schiller did. We can understand the high level of awareness he had in trying to create his own illusions – joy, after all, is the reflection of the concept of enthusiasm that has gone in search of an audience that does not entirely desire as it should. Astonished, perhaps even envious, we can guess the extent to which bourgeois people of the period were still secure in their ability to slide from reality into eulogy. How short were the paths from piano duet to humankind at that time, and how quickly humans rose from mongrels to become a special breed. Who, today, can still ignore the facts as mindfully as an educated German around 1800 was able to? Who, today, can still look solely at the good and beautiful, hoping that reality will follow the good example? We are too familiar with the end of the story of the culture of the bourgeoisie: it sank, it ruined its reputation with hubris, it was destroyed by the onset of reality in the twentieth century. But we cannot deny that its strongest part was this chamber music of illusion that was played from scores in all the better homes – also, if necessary, since the gentleman senator was busy at the office, with the help of accompanists at the piano, who gradually lost their initial shyness beside the lady of the house playing the violin.⁴

Ladies and gentlemen, let me say a few words about the catastrophe of Beautiful Politics. I can be brief because in this case we are tapping the potential of a common fund of freely accessible intuition. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were a test run for utopias, and after going through that it is clear to everybody concerned why the modern ‘free states’ or democratic systems, as we call them nowadays, were unable to provide fertile soil for the theocracy of beauty inspired by Hölderlin and graecomania. The only Beautiful City that passed the examination of history almost intact is the Kingdom of Sarastro, where revenge is unknown, at least as long as the aria ‘Within these sacred halls’ is playing. Only on the opera stage do princes embrace their opponents and even hug their assassins so tight that the dagger falls out of their hands. Of course, what should have made people think early on are the menacing lines, ‘*Wen diese Lehren nicht erfreun/verdient nicht, ein Mensch zu sein*’ (‘Whomever these lessons do not please/Deserves not to be a human being’).⁵ Even on stage, the relation between enthusiastic inclusiveness and exterminating exclusiveness is illuminated for a brief moment – but who cares about the text in a transfigured world in which the bass is

always right? All the same, didn't the glamorous militant anthem of the French people contain a disturbing, racist refrain that threatened extinction with the words: 'impure blood should soak the sacred fields of the fatherland'? Who would have been allowed to make a fuss about such scruples at this dawn of humanity? Who would have wanted to disrupt the triumphal music of the philosophies of unification and reconciliation? People only realized much later that every attempt to stage the real state according to the scripts of Beautiful Politics must inevitably end in atrocities of unprecedented scope. In fact, as soon as it developed militant features, Beautiful Politics, the practice of embracing the universe and of absolute totalizing inclusion, proved to be a very costly dream. Those awakening were forced to see their relationships clearly and to realize that every totalizing inclusion targeted to reality is paid for with equally real exclusions. And because this realization has now pervaded the everyday attunement of society, Beethoven's music, at the very point where it succeeded impressively in the instrumentation and vocalization of enthusiasm for the human species, was incorporated into a historical movement that shifted its basic meaning, or, better still, its sources of vigour and panache.

To understand this more clearly it is worth remembering that from the beginning the aesthetic sphere seemed to be at least two-dimensional because it was responsible not only for the beautiful but also for the sublime, and this is what has been responsible for the transition to reality for hundreds of years. Just as impatient, impure theory constantly wanted to transform into practice, ambitious beautiful things were urgently trying to make the transition to the sublime – even if it should turn out to be terrible. This is why, from the very beginning, Beautiful Politics was always conceived as Sublime Politics. Indeed, the beautiful is nothing but the beginning of the terrible; yet we cannot be sure that it will casually disdain from destroying us. When the state mounted the platform in full regalia and demanded access to the citizen's heart, it was acting as the Sublime State, that is, as the administrator of serious cases. Sublime may mean something that reminds humans of the possibility of their extermination – whether in the form of the concept of the infinitely large that appears as the mathematical sublime, or the observation of nature in its elementary dimensions that seem to tower over us limitlessly when we encounter the irresistible might of the dynamic sublime. But long before the encounter with these factors was worked out in aesthetic terms, the state of the early modern age had already established itself theatrically to its subjects and enemies as a potentially deadly force. It competed with nature as the source of impressive exterminations. It could not

resist killing sufficiently often to support its claim to be the most serious instance. This is why, from the moment it became bourgeois, the sublime appeared philosophically as the aesthetic reflection of human freedom. It reflects our ability to take a position on our own downfall and the threat of it – provided that we retain the position of a spectator and remain secure from real threats. In this position the soul can hover between submission and resistance. Since the eighteenth century the bourgeois soul has practised the fall into omnipotent Nature in its artistic media. It never ceases imagining what it would be like to plane crash in the Alps or to be in distress in the Atlantic or to be touched by horror from the nether world at a country estate in the Scottish moors. In its nightmarish moments it rehearses death thoroughly, it watches heroes dissolving into the overpowering and sinking into the incredible, but as neither the Alps nor oceans nor haunted castles can satisfy the demand for occasions of downfall, there must be frequent recourse to the original source of the sublime, the Sublime State, where noble annihilation, both virtually and in real terms, still seems most likely to be guaranteed in its emergencies, the foreign policy wars. This touches on the sensitive point at which our late modern and postmodern embarrassment about the legacy of cultural enthusiasm begins. Today we can see more clearly how the sublime functioned as a bridge from the resistance of the subject to its voluntary self-extinction. In its founding period, bourgeois culture faced the enormous task of transferring the sublime from the absolutist to the democratic state. A bourgeoisie that reclaimed the aristocracy could not avoid this imperative. How could it dispose of itself without the aid of the aesthetic ideology that offered it the means to bring the beautiful into direct contact with the sublime?

A recently published book tells us that Beethoven was an expert at this operation.⁶ The task set by the period and the reward for its solution are described with the greatest clarity in the text for his *Choral Fantasy opus 80*: ‘When love and strength are united/ The favour of the Gods rewards Man.’ Love must come into play as the ability to conclude the better social contract with beautiful souls; strength is needed to hold one’s own on the sublime front and to be bold in the face of downfall. This is the only way we can reach a more precise concept of enthusiasm: for joy to arise in the best bourgeois sense, the beautiful must be sublime and the sublime beautiful – and at the point where both elements are equally balanced, politics dissolves in emotion. Indeed, society seems destined to emanate its statehood, including its means of violence, like a spontaneous projection from itself. In the sublime civic state, volunteers precede conscription; tears surpass laws; the heart outbids the

highest taxation rate. Perhaps there is simply no work in the history of the arts that holds the balance between the beautiful and the sublime at such a high level as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony does, particularly in its final chorus, when the celebration of friendship and voluntary downfall combine as a perfect example in the sublime total perspective. Such music irresistibly recruits us into the beautiful totality. It gives us an idea of what it would sound like if the small-scale politics of friendship could ever share common ground with the religious claim of the Sublime State.

The Ninth Symphony has been dubbed a Marseillaise of humankind and claimed for the Eternal Enlightenment; but it has also been identified as the emanation of the German soul and repatriated, at least in the sense of an imaginary copyright, as a lasting loan of the Germans to humanity. We acknowledge the validity of both claims because both express modes of the politics of enthusiasm and both remain loyal to the ideals of the nineteenth century, to the idealistic populism that wished the sublime to have its place in popular tradition just as much as the beautiful, which, by definition, could be guaranteed the necessary appreciation. Aesthetic ideology brought the upsurge into the sublime within everybody's reach, just as universal conscription democratized the chance to perish for the sublime civic state, which was now called the fatherland. With reference to the Marseillaise, Hegel clearly stated the political power of popular-sublime music:

But enthusiasm proper has its ground in the specific idea, in the true spiritual interest which has filled the nation and which can be raised by music into a momentarily more lively feeling because the notes, the rhythm and the melody can carry the man away who gives himself up to them.

He regretfully added, however, that situations had arisen meanwhile in which music alone was no longer enough to create 'such a courageous mood and a contempt of death'.⁷ Similarly, modern universal conscription has both generalized and pragmatically downgraded great gallantry.

The principle of the modern world – thought and the universal – has given courage a higher form because its display now seems to be more mechanical, the act not of this particular person but of a number of a whole [. . .].⁸

It is for this reason that the modern world has invented the gun, which not only changed the purely personal form of bravery into

something more abstract but also embedded the decline of the individual in favour of the totality in an impersonal mass event.

The continuing development of society and its art system has demonstrated that the synthesis between high and low cannot be permanently maintained. In terms of cultural history, the major event of the twentieth century – if we want a really bold formula – is that the idealistic synthesis of the beautiful and the sublime was exploded. This is merely another way of saying that the cultural revolution of the twentieth century caused the members of the avant-garde to break with aesthetic agreement and led to the de-sublimation of the mass audience. This twofold revolution ended the flirtation of masses and nations with the sublime and separated it from the beautiful – though we should not underestimate the transitional function of kitsch, whether socialist or nationalist, which has carved out its role *ad nauseam* as a decadent form of the popular notion of the sublime. The political result is to expose the Sublime State as a kitschy state and compel it to present itself in future as objective or discrete. The aesthetic outcome is more complex. Nonetheless, looking back at the past century we can recognize a clear structural dominance: mass culture has expanded the paths of the beautiful into highways.

Kant would have trouble with his definitions all over again because everything is beautiful now except art, and everything is critical except art criticism. High culture has retreated into morose and costly sublimity. It lives on the fact that people can no longer accuse it of being generally understandable. The secret of its success consists in many people nowadays following the basic principle that makes the modernized sublime flourish: what nobody can find beautiful or understandable must be collected and exhibited. This is how the Sublime State still asserts its competence as the provider of museums.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me end by saying that the historical drift of the modern art system has led to conditions in which the dangers characteristic of the age of Beautiful Politics and of the Sublime State seem initially to have been eliminated. The fateful explosions of the politics of enthusiasm have been relegated to the past; what remains of them still works to create majorities in the relatively harmless shape of consensus technique and creditable art. It would be ungrateful to say that we cannot live with that. Conversely, it would be an exaggeration to claim that this state of affairs inspires satisfaction. The dominant mass culture has released a flow of innocent kitsch; this has not only democratized emotion and relocated beauty from art galleries to bathrooms and beaches, but it has also de-sublimated the sublime, made death banal and

established a kind of expressionism of violence and tastelessness whose only historical counterpart is the bestial entertainments of the Roman arena. Nothing remains of the claim to nobility for all except the inviolable freedom to lower the level even further. Given these conditions, it is obvious that, precisely in democratic mass cultures, it would be worth trying out a new, carefully stabilized relationship between the beautiful and the sublime. There is no discussion at all about the third dimension of the aesthetic, irony, or the fourth, conceptualization.

In the process of clarifying these ideas, classical art must always play the role assigned to it. It is the only benchmark for understanding, first, what is no longer valid, and, second, what remains indispensable. The modern ear, which relates to elaborated experiences of dissonance, is happy with the occasional dip into the tonal world of enthusiastic flexibility that still shows the best that bourgeois culture was able to communicate about its inner states before its victory and decline. We are only too eager to borrow an hour of the enthusiasm of a vanished 'state of the world'. Then, with enlightened nostalgia, we state that we are tempted to join a choir – let me remark here that more people in Germany today are members of choirs than of political parties. (This, incidentally, is only to give the Federal Statistical Office a mention on the Day of German Unity.)

Ladies and gentlemen, the last word goes to an author whose hundredth birthday was publicly commemorated in Germany a few weeks ago. Friedrich Nietzsche was probably the first person to describe the difficulties of listening to classical music after its time in a way that speaks directly to the contemporary mind. In Aphorism 153 in his book *Human, All Too Human*, he noted that 'Art weighs down the thinker's heart':

We can understand how strong the metaphysical need is, and how even nature in the end makes it hard to leave it, from the way, even in a free spirit who has rid himself of everything metaphysical, the highest effects of art easily produce a reverberation of a long-silenced, or even broken, metaphysical string. At a certain place in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, for example, he might feel that he is floating above the earth in a starry dome with the dream of *immortality* in his heart; all the stars seem to glimmer around him, and the earth seems to sink ever deeper downwards.

If he becomes aware of this condition, he may feel a deep stab in his heart and sigh for the man who will lead back to him the lost beloved, be she called religion or metaphysics. In such moments, his intellectual character is being tested.⁹