

Season of Grief

Beethoven's Ninth in Bailey Hall the other evening, April 20, ending in an instant standing ovation by a clearly enchanted audience, was an unforgettable experience. And, like all such truly extraordinary events that are marked not only by artistic merit, but draw their power from the circumstances surrounding their creation or performance, it recalled others and enhanced their significance.

I was reminded of a stellar performance on Christmas Day of 1989, only weeks after the unexpected fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, that haunting date in German history. Few people believed it would ever happen. But now, suddenly, reunification in justice and freedom, as the truncated old national anthem phrases it, was within reach.

The concert took place in the Schauspielhaus on Berlin's Gendarmenmarkt, the city's ancient soul and center, before an overflow crowd that spilled into the plaza.

Leonard Bernstein conducted. He had assembled an orchestra of superb musicians from the four allied nations that defeated Germany in 1945 and subsequently occupied the divided country.

Emboldened by age and the tumultuous events just passed, Bernstein changed Schiller's text, replacing Freude / Joy with Freiheit / Freedom. Beethoven himself had altered the text by selecting his stanzas from Schiller's lengthy poem, eliminating some feverish verbosity but restoring the frenzy musically. The Ode to Joy became an Ode to the Moment, whatever the precious occasion.

Schiller had occasionally found his youthful poem a bit too much. He was wrong. Who would want to miss that most exuberant of drinking songs and fervent prayer of gratitude and call to universal solidarity, the driving rhythm of it and the ecstatic rhetoric that proposes an answer, in 1785, to the question of what will unite us at last without killing us first, a question that would soon be answered quite differently by the French Revolution. It is an eminently political statement, valid both before the revolution when Schiller wrote it, and after it when Beethoven picked it up. Like Mozart's Magic Flute of 1791, two years into the revolution that was already sliding into terror, it clings to the vision of universal brotherhood as a stubbornly professed alternative to violent change.

But what brought people across the nation together recently was not the celebration of a common dream, but the shared numbness after yet another atrocity when past genocides were solemnly remembered and current ones the stuff of daily news. They all were on the minds of many who gathered in places of their choice to be together and partake in the "glooming peace" so named by Shakespeare's Prince of Verona on the day of the funeral when the casualties get buried and monuments planned in their place. The immediate need for comfort is satisfied, it makes the unbearable almost bearable. The question on everybody's mind, where do we go from here? is answered. "Some will be pardoned, and some punished." Is that all? Yet the very blandness of the man's language adds to the relief shared by the parties across the graves. Any rhetorical excess would be out of place. Then what? No lasting lesson is learned, no blueprint for a different future emerges. Peace is the short interlude between catastrophes. The days of calm will again be followed by days of infamy until there is no energy left. The infamy of fratricide will continue, here and elsewhere, until the exhaustion is universal. In Greek legend the House of Tantalus/Atreus serves as a telling example when, after generations of atrocities suffered and inflicted, the last two exhausted survivors finally and mercifully vanish from view and are heard no more.

Poets and prophets have paid homage to the ancient insight into the requirements for lasting change. Goethe, wise but unresigned and never a cynic, allows a young man to articulate it in a piece that deals with the displacements caused by the French Revolution: "... finding each other again some day / above our planet laid waste / we will be creatures renewed / reeducated and free and independent of fate."* Three plain adjectives sum up the pedagogical and political agenda of the eighteenth century. Re-education in the name of reason; Freedom/Liberty, one of the rallying cries of the French Revolution; Independence, the very spirit of 1776. All of them an expression of human yearning for perfection and wholeness in our life time, more urgent after each costly failure. A vision that will have to wait for better conditions.

When the goal remains elusive, the quest has to be its own reward. This is the final insight of Goethe's Faust, when we meet the protagonist again at age 100, restless and ruthless as ever, still chasing and avoiding that moment to which he'd say "please stay, don't vanish." He dies anticipating it in the shape of new land created by human ingenuity, where all men are equal, and where he, Faust, is but one among equals. Not in his lifetime. It would take another Faust, another species.

And so the pilgrimage continues, with shelter and refuge provided along the way, and the consolation of music and the spoken word. We concede nothing and learn nothing and plod on like Sisyphus, a happy man according to Albert Camus, drawing strength from the virtue of hope and the benefit of the doubt and, if we are lucky, from each other.

* Hermann und Dorothea, IX

Copy for The Cornell Daily Sun, May 2, 2007.