



**Tabea Zimmermann –
Winner of the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize 2020**

A conversation with Maja Ellmenreich, cultural editor at Deutschlandfunk, in January 2020

Ms Zimmermann, you are a passionate player of chamber music, professor at the Hanns-Eisler Conservatory in Berlin, you perform with prominent orchestras and conductors, you are president of the Beethoven House in Bonn and – this year, for the final time – manager of Bonn’s Beethoven Week.

How do you imagine someone who doesn’t know you would see you? What title would you give yourself?

A musician who can play viola.

So, playing the viola isn’t your main occupation?

No, I feel that the viola is simply the instrument that I can play best. But I don’t see it as the core of my life. I’m not a viola player per se, but rather a musician that can play viola.

You started learning viola at a young age. All the other chamber music instruments had already been assigned to your elder siblings and they just needed a viola player. Was this pragmatic approach however a stroke of luck for you?

I am extremely happy that I got the chance to discover the viola at such a young age and identify myself with it. And yet I am also happy that influential teachers and other people gave me a musical experience that extended beyond the viola. I believe that one can achieve a lot more on one’s own instrument if that is placed within the context of other sounds and instruments, thus enabling the development of ideas as to what sounds can be produced and how this can be transferred to the instrument at hand.

Would you say that the human voice is a common context into which an ideal sound is developed?

That depends entirely on the score. There are of course composers that have written extensively for the instrument and know how to bring out the viola’s best qualities. Especially in the 20th century, there was a desire to bring the viola out of its function as a filler for the mid-range and into the limelight as a virtuoso instrument. In this kind of a situation, a lot of imagination is required as there is such little material to guide you. One therefore shouldn’t restrict one’s thoughts to what one already knows.

Of course, the context of the human voice as a model did help, as it is always there. But there is the opportunity to imagine other orchestral instruments in the viola’s place: if I imagine a flute, then I end up using a different bow speed. If it is a trombone that I am imagining, then the tone ends up different again. The method is dependent upon the imagined tone.

Does the viola require this form of tonal support? After all, it is an instrument that seems full of challenges. It doesn’t always come out of its shell as easily as other instruments.

I have taken on the motto used by Audi adverts: "Vorsprung durch Technik" (Prominence through technology). If you understand the limitations of the instrument well, then you are best placed to fight against them. The thicker strings, the slower resonance waves – that is an integral part of the instrument. But if I wish to overcome these limitations, then I need to be a bit quicker than violinists, so that the same tonal speed is reached.

I believe that every instrument has its challenges, and specialists are aware of this. And contemporary composers give the viola ever more jobs to do. I find this very exciting. But this demands a certain technical know-how, so that one can go beyond the standard viola sound. For example, playing chords: that is hard enough on the violin, but the distance between the strings on a viola is even wider. If I want to play three or four strings at the same time, then I need a huge burst of energy. But it shouldn't sound like hard work, of course. One requires an ability to understand and control the physical elements of the instrument so that you can turn your desired tone into a reality.

But you are of course heavily involved in the development of the viola, as several prominent composers have – through your playing – felt compelled to write for you and the instrument. György Ligeti, for example, with his epoch defining solo sonata, or Heinz Holliger, Enno Poppe and Wolfgang Rihm. Is it an honour, or is it stressful, to have a piece written specifically for you?

It is both. It is always an exciting task involving a multitude of uncertainties and questions. When I get a new score and open it, my first thought is: 'I can't do this! How on earth can I do this?' And then a laborious but also enjoyable process of trial and error begins, until progress is made. By breaking the score down into manageable chunks, solutions are found – like solving a jigsaw puzzle. But of course, most jigsaw puzzles give you the benefit of seeing the end-product on the front of the container.

With a premiere, it is different: there are lots of puzzle pieces but no pre-defined picture. It exists only in the head, in the ears of the composer. And it only comes out by working on the score. That I am permitted to participate in this is an honour. And it is very satisfying afterwards to be able to say: 'Okay, that can probably grow. I think that next time, this or that can be done better. But I've done my bit. I'm permitted to be involved in the birth of a new piece.'

You said that your first reaction is often, 'I can't do this'. Is self-doubt still part of your musical life even after all of these years and successes?

Doubt is always there. I have, however, managed to make peace with it, because it can also give me drive. I think to myself: 'Okay, now you are going to break this big problem down into smaller problems'. This method works very well.

Sometimes, I use autosuggestion, even in concerts. Before a difficult concert, there is always self-doubt. If that is too strong, though, it can negatively impact my playing. So, I talk myself up: 'You have prepared this very well! You can do it!'. But that doesn't work with me at the beginning. It seems wrong to me to talk yourself up to doing something that you know hasn't been prepared properly. It only works when I know that I have given my all. Then I can know that this method has worked well in the past and that it will work again for me in the present.

Let's move away from self-reflection: does being awarded the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize represent a confirmation for you?

It is an incredible honour! And I am very happy about receiving the award! I never thought it possible that I would be a candidate. It feels very humbling and confirmatory: my ideas and involvement thus far with music, my decisions and the music industry – that this was the right direction for me. That I have oriented myself from within, remaining true to myself and asking myself, whether I really want to undertake a particular engagement or act upon a particular idea – whether I really want that. It is not very important to me whether that is in a large concert hall

or the best-paid concert, but rather whether it is interesting and fitting for me. And that is what I have done for the last 30 years. And that this is now to be rewarded with such a significant award, is something I am honestly very excited about.

Let's talk about your approach to music: last year, you said in an interview with the 'Neue Musikzeitung' that the classical music industry has become dirty. What do you find so unappealing about it?

I watch with a heavy heart the independence of wealthy donors, Russian oligarchs, large companies who organise events in beautiful locations in the mountains. But this is not the issue: very often, these are wonderful concerts, but the music is no longer the focus. I think it is dangerous to view music as entertainment 'on the side', almost as a side-dish. It is worrying that event-culture is growing while subsidised music culture is decreasing.

Is it right to say that you are for subsidies and against a music scene that is financed only by donors?

Yes, I think that a mixture of the two can function well. But we should be careful in Germany not to see culture as a luxury good, but rather as a function for the whole community. Often, musical education refines thoughts such as: 'Is that profitable? Who is this for? Who wants to go to music college?'

I feel that we as a community should invest more money in education – especially music education for children – because it has value in terms of knowledge and personal development. A musical education has huge advantages and I just wish that we could focus our attention on the long-term rather than the short-term of whether a concert or performance is beneficial. For example, I think it is grossly unfair that a private event-organiser is able to benefit from having a wealth of available musicians to engage who have made their names through subsidised concert organisers, and yet is in no way obliged to provide student discounts for attendees. The risk has thus been transferred onto the whole community. The profit can be reaped singlehandedly by the private event-organiser. I feel that an obligation to provide a certain contingent of discounted tickets for students, charities etc. would be a great improvement.

What exactly does a child gain through learning an instrument, regardless of whether that leads to a career as a professional musician or not?

I believe that an education in music brings benefits in terms of communication, the learning of new skills, concentration, observation, emotion, rhythm, self-confidence, amongst others. It could be in a small choir, but it doesn't even have to involve an instrument: simply working long-term on a goal and achieving it demands concentration, but this then gives satisfaction through playing together in a group.

I think everyone who had involvement with music in their youth, whether professionally or as an amateur, can confirm this. It is something that you can't measure, and yet is something that people carry with them throughout their life.

It is not about seeing music education as a direct path to becoming a professional, but rather seeing it as a form of language which forms an important part of one's education, like maths or sport.

In this jubilee year for Beethoven, you are directing the composer's chamber music with colleagues as part of the Bonn Beethoven Week. Do you feel like you know all there is to know about Beethoven already? Or does this sort of project enable you to learn new facets?

The best thing about directing Beethoven Week in Bonn's Beethoven House is the sheer amount of knowledge I get to take away with me. The past six years have been a demanding but wonderful experience.

It was our intention from the very beginning to present Beethoven's complete chamber output in his jubilee year. Of course, I don't know all there is to know about Beethoven, but I enjoy every new interaction I have with his works.

I think the Beethoven jubilee year celebrations is wonderful and I certainly wouldn't join the ranks of those who say that too much Beethoven is played. I believe that it is great that successive generations get a chance to engage with Beethoven's oeuvre more intensively as part of a jubilee year. We know the name 'Beethoven'. We know a number of works intimately. But I do not believe that many listeners or musicians know all there is to know about Beethoven's output.

You are only the third female to be awarded the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize. Is this an indication that there is a form of gender gap in the music scene, i.e. a social, political difference between the genders?

I don't think I can generalise: it depends on the area. In orchestras, things have really changed. Also in colleges, females have been in the majority for a long time. It is however interesting to compare how many females study music against how many females then get jobs in the music industry afterwards. But it is when you start looking at the higher levels, e.g. management in colleges and directors of institutes, that is where females start to look thin on the ground. Things have been achieved, but there is still lots to do. If I look at my own career, I would hope that I have never been engaged in a job simply because of my gender, but rather because I was good at what I did.

You are also a professor of viola at the Hanns-Eisler Conservatory in Berlin. Recently, you said that: 'teaching gets more important for me every year'. How do you explain this development?

Maybe it has something to do with my children: at the moment, they are roughly the same age as my students. That is something which has changed dramatically over the years: when I began teaching in Saarbrücken, my students were older than me. Then there was a period when things swapped, though I was only marginally older than them. I think you get a changed perspective. And as my children are now so close to the age my students are, I possibly have a better understanding of young people. But one thing is clear: they bring me great positives in terms of my engagement with music. The conversations I have with students, the development of ideas, the communication of values – that is something that I could no longer do without.

You yourself studied in Freiburg and Salzburg – in Salzburg with the great violinist Sandor Végh. Do these years still have an effect on you and your teaching now?

Yes, they do. But the most important teacher was my first in the music college in Lahr: I was taught as a beginner for ten years by Dietmar Mantel. The foundation that he gave to me in terms of approaching music, the flexibility he trained in me to listen very precisely, the balancing of intonation enabled me – even at a very young age – to gain great advantages. My greatest thanks must therefore go to my first teacher.

Tabea Zimmermann, what gives you joy when you look at our current musical landscape?

I think it is great to see how many young people are actively involved in music, for example how many string quartets there are who have decided to explore this difficult path with great idealism. The quality of youth chamber groups is astonishing!

Do you see a strong political consciousness among young musicians? You once said that: 'We musicians must be more political'.

I don't actually see much initiative. I actually have the feeling that very few young people and even older colleagues express any political views. A colleague Igor Levit is a rare exception and I admire him for that – how he expresses himself publically – and wish him great luck and hope that he maintains his passion.

It isn't difficult for me to form an opinion and to defend that opinion. However, it is much harder for me to decide whether I should make my views public and, if so, how I should do that.

It is important to me when dealing with daily life and other people that you ask the question, what can I contribute? How can I be a role model, have a positive influence, know the consequences of my decisions? Every decision for something automatically contains a decision against something else. I see it as my life's job to balance up these opposing forces. The more I dedicate myself to music and to those around me, the more strength I have tomorrow to undertake new challenges.

Translation: Robert Jacobs