

Between Two Worlds:  
Peter Gülke  
Translation: Philipp Blume

Thus woven through the realm of Art  
Is a sense of the Eternal.  
*Goethe, Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*

It is hard to describe activities that shift or cross existing boundaries, and Peter Gülke is by his own admission engaged in exactly such activities. What he can teach us goes beyond music: a persistent questioning of limits, a mindset in which mediation through history, tradition, and the past thrives on a respect for this inheritance. Time and again in conversations he will begin a sentence with “We must not forget that...” – and then open an lesson from the past toward the future. He is to the same degree committed to progress, to an openness toward what is to come, critically protesting against that which Hegel calls the “positive”: that which is calcified. Gülke has demonstrated that we, as interpreters – whether we're actively bringing the work of art to life or reflecting upon it – must be wary of all that is resultative, and, by the same token, wary of our own selves as interpreting subjects. Out of this doubt he makes a musical thinking necessary in which, after Hölderlin, “the method of the poetic spirit” is established as the “method of the musical spirit.” As his work in theory and in practice shows, this must be regarded as poetic and can only be understood dialectically, which explains his equally intimate relationship to words as to music. One must not only think dialectics but live it as well – in the words of Horace, as ‘biformis vates’, as mediator in a double sense: one who exists in and with the split and thereby sets an example. If we engage with the conductor Gülke, we experience through his approach an insight into musical structure, and how it is open to moments of transcendence; if we read his words, which are widely admired and have won awards, we experience these as they are and through them witness a dissolution of distinctions, as they dispense with the practice of disciplinary compartmentalization and with academic jargon, instead converting his readers toward a new general process of understanding. At no point does he simplify the complexity of the subject matter, but rather rises to its difficulty by releasing the analysis from the resultative and making it available for philosophical reflection. Gülke is committed to a liberation of research from its private language, and thus seeks to manipulate terminology ‘fluidly’ – as if everything depended on affirming Hegel's idea of the “speculative statement” in his own linguistic texture. Hegel writes:

*This conflict between the form of a proposition in general and the unity of the notion which destroys that form, is similar to what we find between metre and accent in the case of rhythm. Rhythm is the result of what hovers between and unites both. So in the case of the speculative or philosophical judgment; the identity of subject and predicate is not intended to destroy their distinction, as expressed in propositional form; their unity is to arise as a harmony of the elements. The form of the judgment is the way the specific sense appears, or is made manifest, the accent which differentiates the meaning it contains: that the predicate expresses the substance, and the subject itself falls within the universal, is however the unity wherein that accent dies away.*  
*Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, Preface*  
*trans. J.N. Findlay*

The genesis of this approach to music in Gülke's life will be sketched out point by point.

1

One could surmise that Goethe, in his geographical proximity, put into Gülke's hand "the thread along which it was necessary to proceed" – those being the words of the poet himself – after Goethe's own recipe: "to freely connect that which is acquired to that which is innate." This very freedom was not granted to Gülke as such, not from the very beginning. It rather presented itself, in the political reality of his birth year 1934, as an endangered value, forcing him into the dual nature which he himself describes: "I come from Weimar and I know it as a both an intellectual and unintellectual life form, as a town raised up by its most prominent citizens and at the same time overwhelmed by them. [...] It is there that I, as a ten-year-old – just before war's end – saw Goethe's home collapse and witnessed the theatre going up in flames, that I cleared rubble and exhumed corpses together with former Buchenwald inmates and, only a few months later, sitting on the cemetery wall, watched the Americans pull out (leaving behind a fancy scent mixture of gasoline, disinfectant, and Chesterfields) and, on a parallel street, the Red Army simultaneously coming in, primarily on horse-drawn wagons, singing to badly out-of-tune accordions."

2

This fate continues after war's end: Gülke lives through his second decade under the new dictatorship of the GDR, so that intellect permanently came to represent the construction of a counter-world in the face of political reality. "Being coerced into state-affirming generalizations drove the ever-inquisitive opposition in at least two directions – into the more exact, unprejudiced misgivings about a good many ways that areas of human life and action were being mediated, and into a self-immersion into details, as a curiosity about how the general is anchored in the particular, which became ever more conclusive as their area of responsibility became more circumscribed." That music becomes his medium is only natural; he was born into the role of the interpreter. In his own words, "The admiration that interpreters enjoy is a partial compensation for the fact that they, more than any others, are chained to the one attribute of music that in equal measure is its glamor and its misery: transience."

3

Gülke speaks of "being reliant on the here and now" in music, "which cannot even claim the bonus that the originary creators invariably retain, insofar as their achievement can, as an object-work, release itself from them and attain permanence." Against the "abyss of oblivion" they take a stand with their work, which the interpretive act can at least perpetuate by another means: i.e., by inscribing the musical thought process in a provisionally scientific discourse, which deploys a language, that in its turn attempts to depict not results but the train of thought, and thereby attempts to be commensurate with the "elusive" material that is music. Gülke, taking the instrument, the cello, as a point of departure, comes to recognize during his music studies in Weimar, that he could only raise the reality of being a musician to an intellectual level if he preserves his freedom of thought within theory. It's self-evident that he should find his place in the media landscape as a conductor, for here, mediation is a career. But he can only attain his identity by simultaneously training as a scholar: musicologically, philologically, and philosophically.

4

His path leads him to the University of Jena, then to the University of Leipzig of the 1950's, with its Marxist-Leninist leadership, but worked there with minds that taught critical thought outside the prevailing framework or through it. To this day the beacons of this Leipzig progressivism are proverbial: Ernst Bloch, the philosopher, Hans Mayer, the man of letters, among many others – until the obtuseness of the ideology drives them away: overnight they emigrate from Leipzig to the West. Philosophy, German and Romance philology are Gülke's areas along with the major in Musicology. Bloch provides the engine for his own mindset with the famous "open toward the front", which he carries over as an intellectual point of departure for his major field, where he encounters Heinrich Bessler as his philological mentor: he devotes himself to the study of early music, which he always also pursued practically at his instrument, up to the dissertation *Lied Principle and Polyphony in the 15th-Century Chanson*; he develops a fundamental craft which comes to feed into his entire approach to music, and later sustains substantial publications,

beginning with the *Notation of Polyphonic Music*, which he adapts and completes from the papers of Besseler's estate.

5

„The prescribed ideology alone meant that the major field of study, musicology, was out of the question as a viable career; so I made my living first as a dramaturg, répétiteur, cellist, and theatre composer, later as Kapellmeister at numerous theatres, after four such stepping stones at the Staatsoper Dresden, thereafter as GMD in Weimar.“ He doesn't seek out the security of the academic profession, he instead “dances on the razor blade of the moment”, now making music through all the ups and downs, garnering experience as a conductor and exploiting music as a source of insight. The conductor of these years takes up the baton frequently – and he is always writing. Musicians who work with him have, at every stage, the opportunity to see that in his work the making of music is only the beginning, that it also means thinking and, through it, truly living. Gülke's writings from the GDR years mostly emerge from an “escape”, and they gradually establish in their style that which Hegel referred to as the “speculative” and which Bloch applied liberally to various fields.

6

„The musicological work [...] despite being relegated to a hobby, did not suffer [...] A book on the music of the middle ages has even become “popular.“ Already at Stralsund he produces *Monks, Burghers, Minnesingers* – a work which frees the music of the middle ages from all specialization. It attains popularity beyond the confines of the GDR, becomes a cornerstone for the new way of dealing with the so-called “darkness” of this period, which here is illuminated by the socio-historical context. The philologist and historian Gülke absolves the historical material from its own narrowness, by reflecting upon medieval consciousness with the tools of the modern dialectic: in Gülke's a=hands, historical reference and critical invigoration even make the Middle Ages seem “modern”. The author additionally stimulates international attention with the studies on Beethoven (among others, *Introduction as Systemic Contradiction* and *Singability and Thematic Treatment*) as well as Schubert (*The Image of the Late Schubert*); they demonstrate that he puts into practice that which Adorno termed “dialectical analysis”. In the GDR, as Gülke puts it so well, these “could just as well be essays of a sensitized reader”, but for the same reason could be stumbling blocks for the State, insofar as Gülke's works were now being printed in the West or even written at the behest of Western publications.

7

Any accounting of his work, especially in the Dresdner years, where he is now Kapellmeister of the Staatsoper, should include acknowledgment of his editorial work on Beethoven's fifth (with an extensive accompanying volume which sheds new light on the work's structure and its realization) as well as Schubert's *Unfinished*, for which he furnishes a critical edition that also takes into account the sketches. He also brings to light Schubert's fragmentary symphonies, orchestrates them, is even able to record them and present them in moderated concerts with the Dresdner Staatskapelle. His *New Insights into Schubert the Symphonist* bring him international acclaim not only for Schubert research. But he attaches himself to no scientific school of thought, he is and remains conductor and without it, without this aspect of making could not so effectively expand and so generally apply the points he makes. At the Staatsoper Dresden he is somewhat exposed as a nonconformist, but his contribution to the great operatic repertoire, his work on contemporary music make him as indispensable as his cultivation of the orchestra's future members at the conservatory. It becomes increasingly clear that the politically powerful regard him as dangerous, not least because of his scientific achievements. With the directorship in Weimar Gülke comes more and more into the political crossfire, and the threat level rises. He leaves the GDR and must leave wife and child behind – the only opportunity to begin anew in freedom. It takes a full year before he can be reunited to his family.

8

"Not necessarily in accord with inadequately digested center-left-oriented enlightenment around me, I could not see it as coincidental that, on the first evening in what was at that time the other half of the world, I was called upon to conduct 'Fidelio' and then ten times the Ninth Symphony at the end of the same year." Thus he comments on that which in the GDR was referred to as "fleeing the republic". He could count on friends who were aware of his scholarly and artistic potency, among them Carl Dahlhaus, under whose tutelage he obtained his postdoctoral qualification, so that at a future time he might rely on being able to teach. But his foremost occupation remains conducting, and he quickly becomes an insider's tip with a certain "sensational value", on the one hand for those who perceive the value of his approach to art, but on the other hand for those who saw in him the critical practitioner from the "other side", one who is even active as a writer. Soon he is in demand in opera houses and at major orchestras as the itinerant conductor in Germany and internationally: Europe, America, Japan. But this nomad who is sent into the world with the great symphonic repertoire also manifests himself in the written word: he writes the opus *Brahms Bruckner*, fascinating for its "split", which draws parallels, through analysis, between the life events and the works. He also produces a tremendously personal document that uniquely mirrors the dialectic of life, i.e., conducting, and writing: *Music as Refuge: Reflections of a Conductor between East and West*. The effect is that of a diary which doesn't wish to be one, in which the existence between two worlds is given expression that is not so much essayistic as a kind of non-fiction poetry, with and about music: "There, where you are not ..." – as if Schubert's *Wanderer* was the guiding symbol.

9

After three years Wuppertal promotes him into the GMD position, and here he creates the standard opera repertoire and seeks to develop an enlightened profile for the stage. He refashions the standards anew, accentuates the particular – one need only think of the Schreker operas *Irrelohe* or *Das Spielwerk* – bear witness to how indispensable the thinker is in a world of doers, who gleans therefrom not a cult of personality but rather favors the work and the idea. Even during this decade, despite the considerable demands of the practical day-to-day theatre work, Gülke writes. Even the program booklets of the productions he leads are graced with these articles: Because he always keeps account of his musical activities – always prepared to switch over to his second existence as a thinker. That alongside all of this a milestone of research can come about – the opus *Franz Schubert and his Time* – can only inspire awe.

10

After a decade as opera director he becomes a nomad once again, which in no way interrupts Gülke the author. Home base for the teacher is now Freiburg – he takes over a conducting professorship for five years, meanwhile teaching musicology at the University of Basel, later also Zürich. Conducting courses are added – training young musicians so that their knowledge extends beyond technical perfection is his constant objective. These Freiburg years also bring forth major pillars of his written oeuvre: after Schubert the next book publications are devoted to other Classical mainstays: Mozart and Beethoven – with Mozart he achieves a new understanding of the last three great symphonies, under the title *Triumph of Musical Art*; in the case of Beethoven he finally fulfills a wish of Carl Dahlhaus, namely to collect his Beethoven studies from a decade of activity all "under one roof", as Gülke says, according to the "very Beethovenian premise of ... always having the whole before one's eyes" and combines the earlier studies with newer ones, that focus on the interpretive side; he prefaces his Beethoven with the unfolding of this "whole" of Beethovenian thinking, which he places into the philosophical context of the time.

11

This period also sees the publication of *The Language of Music*, now expressly presented as "Essays on Music from Bach to Holliger": they are works of considerable self-reflection. Mostly consisting of then-new studies – then being the 1990's – and a few pivotal older ones that directly tackle musicology as a field, with all its scope and limitations, as well as its practitioners, including some whom Gülke recuperates out of the twilight of disrepute. Essays that give pride of place to incidental music, that

discuss the crucial issue of music and the spoken word; as well as an extensive section with analytical approaches, ones which arise so deeply from performance practice that they become models for a style which Gülke in these years develops as the Hegelian "speculative form of musical thought".

12

After the end of his teaching in Freiburg, Gülke's new locus is Berlin. It should be noted that he still takes on the presidency of the Saxon Academy of Arts, to cut a swath into the future of cultural politics. The Berlin period culminates in a monography to accompany the Schumann bicentennial, under the title *Robert Schumann – Joy and Agony of the Romantic*, an attempt to re-assess the phenomenon Schumann in Romantic consciousness, which makes life gesture and thought transparent in the works – in advance thereof a study appeared in the Schumann handbook under the suggestive title *Schumann's jubilantly endured Romanticism*. Gülke turns his critical eye on the phenomenon interpretation, and demonstrates how the primal tension between doing and thinking can be suspended for the moment of insight: „A distance from particular activities within our musical environs is reflected in my writing: I feel it necessary to here make certain what over there is being betrayed – always remaining mindful that writing is only the third-best way, after performing and listening, to deal with music.“

13

He is concerned with sublimating the "third best way": where is the music "actually?" he asks, and turns against the purism of "absolute" music: "We stand up to absolutist purity by upholding semantically blemished music, one which doesn't shy away from extramusical meanings, contents, topics, etc." This principle guides studies in the form of disquisitions, essays, miscellanea, which he will term "snapshots" and which function like signal flares for musical consciousness. They are collected under the title *Upbeats-Postludes – Studies on Musical Interpretation*, wherein appear not only the reflections of a conductor on his craft, such as "The Evolving Image of the Conductor", on the orchestra as an entity, and on eminent conductors deserving of a just accounting. Exemplary in this latter regard are his homage to the conductor Hermann Abendroth, who was not so much a teacher as a role model; or the incisive analysis of the much-discussed case of Furtwängler. A blueprint for a theory of interpretation is also included, under the title "The Aging of Masterpieces", wherein the plurality of the book is concentrated. In the preface we encounter the lovely sentence: "I analyze and speculate about music not only to obtain a more thorough and better-founded, but also a more direct feeling for its beauty than I already have." And he refers tellingly to Schiller's notion of a "second naïveté".

14

It is telling that Peter Gülke has attained greater fame as an author, which might give one pause. As a conductor he is, with the passing years, less in demand, not least because a fear of contemplation in the music business is massively on the rise, as it threatens to undermine the market compatibility of its patterns and rites. *Is commerce already nesting in our interpretations?* is the title of one of his critical reflections. One nevertheless would like to learn from the conductor Peter Gülke, ideally – in a manner of speaking – subcutaneously. In his conducting courses, in his classes, in his pedagogical activities with youth orchestras, the musicians of tomorrow, he lets the theoretically attained knowledge be converted into practical musical action and vice versa. A memorable recent example is the rehearsal work for Beethoven's *Eroica* with the Brandenburg Philharmonic: rehearsal phrases centered on craft become a school of classical aesthetics, even though theory is at no point called by its name. And yet his reputation as a theoretician causes hesitation toward him as a practitioner. That is the prize that the thinking interpreter must pay to the market of today, because thinking apparently diminishes its market value – „No good deed remains unpunished“.

15

After the death of his spouse, a fellow traveler through many decades, ever his most upstanding critic, with whom he lived and worked – the translation work on writings of Rousseau and Grétry are just a few

documents of the collaboration – Peter Gülke returns to Weimar. Take note: to become Gülke's wife, the Romance philologist from West Berlin moved into the GDR; years later he must leave her and their daughter behind. Gülke's work since this encounter with death is guided by the ‚meditatio mortis‘ and the way it is manifest in music: his writings are devoted to musical “final matters”. And this image will bring a new immediacy of thought, of musical thought, to the individual in his contradictions.

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