

Alex Nowitz

*Greeting cards from inhabitants of
an undiscovered world*¹

An essay on the genesis of an exhibition piece or
how to handle rejections

(September 2017)

Apparently, this text is a programme note by an offended artist. However, it's a recurring theme in the history of art music that one (the composer) gets rejected by the other (the musician). And vice versa. Normally, as it is expected, the two of them are in the state of a love affair. But similar to some marriages, this isn't always the case. What remains is to answer the question how to react and how to fill the void that gets created through refusal. This is always being done in a different way. In fact, it depends on the character and the temper of the one rejected. It's for this reason that it might be interesting for the reader to look into the options the composer-artist has in order to deal with rejection, ignorance, and sometimes also arrogance, in a productive rather than a destructive manner.

In *The Origin of The Work of Art*, Martin Heidegger says “To the work-being belongs the setting up of a world”². To hear the set-up world of a musical composition means: to listen to the sounding result of the actual interpretation performed by a mediator which is, in most cases, the musician. In regards of the orchestral miniature with the title *Ich bin das Volk*³, composed by the author for the Philharmonic Orchestra of the Staatstheater Cottbus in 2015, the voice, given by the composer to the musicians, was met with refusal. The commission was based on the idea to set up a concert for an orchestra to perform a collection of orchestral miniatures newly written by the composers of the BVNM⁴, an association of living composers in Brandenburg. Each composer was selected in advance and asked to refer to the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the reunification of West and East-Germany taking place on the 3rd of October 2015. So, even the orchestra was officially commissioned and the work is only five minutes long, the musicians rejected the score and its parts due to a number of incomprehensible and unconvincing excuses (as this is, of

course, the composer's perspective), all of which were conveyed orally through the mobile phone one week before the scheduled premiere.

The author is just guessing and speculating, but maybe, with regard to the title of the work, *I am the people*, there were political reasons for the orchestra not to play it. Or it was simply fear of any kind that was involved in the decision. If the orchestra was afraid of possibly unsettling the audience, one is inclined to ask what's the point about setting up such a concert without critically question how the country developed after 25 years of reunification. One of the goals of the compositional work is to illuminate the fact that, in the meantime, parts of Germany turned into a more-than-'just'-neo-liberal as well as xenophobic and racist country. In fact, some of its inhabitants become monsters by gathering and shouting out loud the slogan *Wir sind das Volk* in order to block arriving refugees, children included(!). In this context, following historical facts need to be noted: During the late eighties, on the streets in a number of cities in East-Germany, the slogan *We are the people* was chanted to demonstrate for more democratic rights within the political system of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In fact, these rallies, 25 years ago, were the starting point of a peaceful change which eventually lead to the fall of the Iron Curtain, the end of the Cold War and, finally, the reunification of the West and the East in 1990. And now, 25 years later, the slogan is used again, but in an ugly way. It's a xenophobic and racist throng that incites hatred and violence and does definitely not welcome refugees.

So, the composition *Ich bin das Volk*, is a response and the attempt to call attention to such unbearable incidents occurring on the news increasingly from the time period of 2015 until now.⁵

Changing the slogan from *We are the people* to *I am the people*, and using it as both title and compositional material which meanders through the instruments of the orchestra is the basic idea of the work. Nowadays, one would assume, this could be understood by an audience. And even if not, art always had and has the task to push forward the sociopolitical and sociocultural discourses. Besides, the audience should never be underestimated.

Anyways, it was the conductor calling the composer to report and express that, apparently, there is 'a strong resistance from the musicians to play the music stemming from the insecureness and general unwillingness to use their own voices as an additional compositional layer in the work'. In this context, it needs to be mentioned that more than three months in advance, by the time when the score and the parts of the composition were handed in, the composer suggested to set up a workshop situation of half an hour in length which allows the composer to demonstrate what he's after.⁶ But unfortunately, there were no responses to the repeatedly offered proposal. Anyways, what remains from such a case is the question: what can one do to fill the gap that emerges when setting up a world that hasn't been received by the one whom it was set up for – the listener?

A little earlier in *The Origin of The Work of Art*, Heidegger says "To be a work means: to set up a world." (Heidegger, p.22). To set up the world means: to accumulate energy. The energy of a musical composition manifests itself as a score howsoever (notation or tape) and, by doing so, it is sealed in exactly that. Its release only takes place during the process of realising the score, its interpretation. To be music the music needs to

be played! If the energy is kept locked, the world, in a Heideggerian sense, hasn't been set up yet, or in other words, the work doesn't exist. In order to let the work come into being, the process of setting up the world needs to be continued. For the work to become a work, the energy that has been put into setting up a particular world, needs to be transformed into some other kind of work-being. In this respect, the work of the orchestral miniature *Ich bin das Volk* has been transfigured into a new one

bearing the title of *Greetings cards of inhabitants of an undiscovered world*. The trick is obvious: the initially intended musical composition has now been turned into a visual art work that consists of 17 postcards each of which represents one page of the score in reversed colour. The resulting negatives can be read as an expression for a sorrow for depriving the audience members of listening to a work that was dedicated to them. Even though the perception of the work has shifted from its sonic and musical realm to the visual arts, the artist can, at least, to a certain extent, release the accumulated energy. By transforming the work into another work-being that voices another aspect of its content, the artist avoids the emergence of a void, an empty space.

By now, the story isn't ended yet. It'll be interesting to see how it develops further. Possibly, there will be an audience one day that will be able to hear the sounds of the inhabitants from a world which then, hopefully, will have been discovered by its mediators to its full and intended extent.

¹ The original title is in German: *Grußkarten von Bewohnern einer unentdeckten Welt: 17 Negative der Partitur der Orchesterminiatur 'Ich bin das Volk' im Postkartenformat* [17 negatives in the format of postcards, taken from the score of the orchestral miniature 'I am the people']

² Martin Heidegger: *Off the beaten track [Holzwege]*, edited and translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge University Press 2002, p.24. The original "Zum Werksein gehört die Aufstellung einer Welt" is taken from Martin Heidegger: *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, Reclam Stuttgart 1960, reprinted 2012, p. 42. The very first appearance of *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* was in 1935 as part of three lectures by Heidegger given at the society for the science of art [Kunstwissenschaftliche Gesellschaft] in Freiburg i.Br.

³ The title can be translated as *I am the people*.

⁴ The BVNM is the abbreviation for *Brandenburgischer Verein für Neue Musik e.V.* which is an association of living composers in Brandenburg (Germany) that, on an annual basis, organises the festival *intersonanzen* taking place in Potsdam, the capital of Brandenburg.

⁵ E.g. http://videos2.focus.de/wochit2/2016/02/19/104760203-1280x720_Feb_19_2016_10_12_35.MP4

⁶ The idea about the workshop was to demonstrate that the tasks asked from the musicians weren't difficult to realise or, in other words, were simple enough to be easily produced by any of the orchestra members. The requirements were written in a musical language that every musician should be familiar with and that doesn't over-challenge the time and endeavors of the interpreters.