

Music and Pandemic

Does the Corona Pandemic Call Us to A New Look at Questions of Our Times?

The corona pandemic has exaggerated something that was anyway becoming very strong in the lives of so many people – living within the alternative reality of the digital world. Suddenly a huge sector of the population was not only studying and doing their work at home (meaning online) and joining digital meetings and webinars, while consuming podcasts – but also, more and more, using electronic means of connecting with friends and family – via “Facebook” (without the *face* - the irreplaceable process of the “face to face” encounter); via “Zoom” (the speed of astrality) and “Skype” (implying an alternative to communication with the heavens?)

I certainly do not wish to condemn modern communication methods and have no inclination to “turn back the times” but feel we need to be aware of where we are going, to use technology in measure and in service of the good, and to consider what could help us to balance the effects. The value of human intelligence has never before been so strongly challenged and with it the identity of the human being! Intelligence can be created artificially – but humanity cannot.

So what actually lifts us above the state of being an intelligent higher animal? Is the human being after all the crown (corona) of creation, or do we still need to strive for our true “crowning”? Perhaps this indeed has to do with the connection to the spirit as it was always depicted in images of the fiery anointment at Pentecost: a community event of understanding beyond the limits of single languages. And this began with the *hearing* of a “sound from heaven”!

And we were not allowed to sing for each other, or to sing together! Through the pandemic speech and singing became activities of potential harm; the breath of my fellow human beings became something to be afraid of, something with hidden dangers. Language and music have begun to crumble as bridges between human beings, between groups and nations..... and between the human being and the spiritual world. What will that mean long term? Will everything get back to “normal”? Was this a wakening call to notice what had already been developing – or perhaps also devolving and degenerating? Perhaps we had left the “norm” already?

The sense of hearing is without a doubt an area of great concern in our times; *real* speech and *real* music need to be seen as lifelines for the *real* human being, which is itself ultimately at stake.

Over 100 years ago now Rudolf Steiner emphasized that to grasp the twelve-fold reality of the human senses was the first step necessary in order to understand the human being. Beyond what we know as the senses for the environment (sight, taste, smell and the sense of warmth), he described “higher senses”, allowing us to perceive not only the physical phenomena, but also the levels of soul and spirit. We have a perception for speech that distinguishes it from any other phenomena, and can have direct impressions of the inner intentions and thoughts of the other. We can also have a direct experience of the inner being itself: the “I” of the other. These are “social” senses and of the utmost significance for the human being as a social being.

And the “gateway” to these higher senses is hearing! It is the first level of perception that leads us from the outer environment to the inner qualities, the inner nature of what we can outwardly see and grasp. This could be of the greatest importance for the future development of human society! Identifying and activating fields of practice and healing around this threshold of hearing can surely affect the growing intolerance toward what is different, foreign to me; perhaps it could also help repair the breakdown of inhibition around aggression? Hearing, as the threshold to the higher senses, is in a way the “deciding line” between the outer environment and the spiritual world. The senses themselves are the gateway to the supersensible. And 2020 was a threshold year!

But was it just an isolated year as an exception to the flow of normality of civilization? Are we not reaping the consequences of the steps we have long taken as modern society against the backdrop of an ever constricting agnostic, materialistic and Darwinistic world view? Have we perhaps lost not only paradise (as Milton warned with the 12 chapters of his “*Paradise Lost*” during the early stages of materialism) but now also the path of humanity itself? 300 years of this process have shown their fruits already in the 20th century. Will our century find the necessary turning point?

It was the decisive time of the last century (1932) when the writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley warned so strongly with his book “*Brave New World*”. But the same Huxley wrote something in 1956 that is not as well known, its title, however, is also striking: “*Doors of Perception. Heaven and Hell*”. It tells of the first extensive research into the effects of drugs on human consciousness. This opened the doors for the psychedelic age. The title of the book was inspired by the work of William Blake: “*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*”, a collection of poems, prose and pictures. Blake expressed that heaven and hell, good and evil cannot be forced into a moral duality such as he had experienced through the church, but rather, belong together. This was revolutionary for his time, and his motto made him even more suspect for his contemporaries: *All religions are one!*

Does that not echo into our time? It seems Blake was very much ahead of his time. As a contemporary of Goethe and Schiller, it was his conviction that the task of an artist is to connect through inspiration with the spiritual world and make it experienceable for humanity. His words indeed sound as if they were spoken for today: “*If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is: Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.*” It would seem that the deeply mystical views of Blake link on here to the parable of the cavern given by Plato. Today the question becomes more and more valid: Can we still recognize reality (and truth) as such when it slowly appears through the “chinks of our cavern”? 2020 has also been a year of the threshold to “„alternative reality”.

Unfortunately, Huxley’s work led more into an era of psychedelic experience and substance abuse. His own path took him more and more into questions of spirituality but connected to materialism in a way that Rudolf Steiner had warned about – particularly for the Western world. (Perhaps it is of interest, however, to note that Huxley was very connected to artists – particularly C. S. Lewis and Igor Strawinsky, who dedicated his last musical composition to him after Huxley’s death in 1963). Huxley’s words show clearly how he had moved away from what Blake was pointing to, although his observation of our times is certainly correct:

The urge to escape from selfhood and the environment is in almost everyone almost all the time.

It would seem, however, that just the connection of spiritual experience to the sensual world is of great importance – not an escape from reality through chemical substance, but a path of spiritual experience which can be connected with outer life and enhance and transform it. An “escape from selfhood” for the modern human being should be seen as shattering the tethers of self-centered, addictive materialism in order to find a path to one’s *true* self. It is not insignificant that the anthroposophical Calendar of the Soul shows us the new direction needed on the path of light into summer, the new impetus gained by the event of Pentecost:

*And strongly heart’s divining tells me:
Lose yourself, to find your Self.*

(translation by John Gardner)

This verse is part of a path of inner practice through the cycle of the year, but analogue to the annual experience of moving into the growing light of summer, we can see the situation we have moved into in our times, with the growing significance of the sensual world, and with it of the science-based world view and the one-sided values attached to intelligence. The Calendar of the Soul is certainly an artistic path of practice, a path of the heart. Will we learn to listen to the “divining of the heart” - to develop “heart knowledge” that was so much a life’s ambition for Karl König? Would the arts not have a central task for this process?

It is of interest to see how music took over the stage just out of this connection to substance abuse, and made its way during the sixties into the sub-sensual world of electricity. Even the name of one of the first and most successful psychedelic bands shows the connection to Huxley: in 1965 “The Doors” formed. (Yes, the name was chosen purposely). Music seemed to dig more and more into the complexity of noise and electric frequencies rather than explore the connection to a higher level of sense perception.

In contrast, and in the same period – from the time Huxley’s book was published and into the sixties – Arvo Pärt was beginning to experiment with a new simplicity out of the more cosmic twelve-tone technique of Schönberg and Berg. They – in turn – found their way to a twelve-fold system at the same time that Rudolf Steiner began to explain the twelve-fold nature of the human senses. Can one not see a signature of the times in such apparent coincidences?

And I certainly do not wish to leave out the many questions that pertain especially to young people – questions in connection both with music and with the “higher”, social senses, particularly if we see how the fascination for music festivals has continued since Woodstock, as events of social experience and yet as mass events inevitably connected to electronics. Especially in this scene the consumption of synthetic drugs has boomed. How will this reckon when we can look back on times of the pandemic?

It is certainly not just a coincidence that 2020 was a preparation year for the Karl König Institute for publications in two significant thematic areas: about the twelve senses (in two volumes) and about Karl König’s connection to music that led him to be instrumental in the development of music therapy.¹

Where do we stand today as society? The pandemic year 2020 forced us more and more into the use of electronics. And *live* music also belonged to the greater dangers and was forbidden. Do we need to awaken to questions that were already pressing on us *before* the lockdowns - were already pertinent, but not yet so imperative?

It may be that we have (“conveniently”) overlooked that already in 1908, Rudolf Steiner dared to object to paintings being kept in galleries and radically proposed that they should be hung in school buildings in socially deprived areas. This leads into the question of what the equivalent would be with music. Is the time of huge concert halls perhaps coming towards an end as the ultimate goal of performance?

Perhaps music has to re-enter the encounter with smaller social settings, where it is really needed and where a direct encounter between people, both performers and listeners as active agents, can create a new and living environment – opening *new doors* – so that the music of the cosmos can also enter and invigorate earthly life? And then we would need to ask, how could *this* be organized – and financed.

During the past months innovative forms have been experimented with and have arisen out of need and creativity; there were attempts at online concerts, like the Zoom concert with Verdi’s Nabucco for front line health workers; there were the “balcony concerts” around the world, which were sometimes even planned and coordinated during lockdown; and many professional musicians, like the New York Philharmonics, took to the streets in smaller groups to ensure that music still reaches people who need it, particularly in stressful, worrying and lonely situations. Indeed – we know from the Middle Ages how music has helped fight pandemics!

1 In German volume I of “The Twelve Senses” will be published March, volume II in Autumn 2021. In English the volume “*Living Physiology*” from the year 2000 - with works on the twelve senses and the seven life processes – is still available. The volume “*Healing Music – A Spiritual Foundation for Music Therapy*” is being prepared by Katarina Seeherr for 2022.

These are some questions – and they are only questions for now. Surely there would be many more. It seems important, however, not to leave these questions to only musicians or cultural organizers – for they are also social questions and ask that we work towards solutions together. I hope this may be seen as a call for interdisciplinary inspirations.

Richard Steel, New Years Day, 2021