
Open Letter to Thuringian Prime Minister Vogel

'Don't sacrifice German musical heritage to budget austerity'

This open letter to Dr. Bernhard Vogel, the prime minister of the eastern German state of Thuringia, was released by Eisenach State Theater concertmaster Seth Taylor, following the announcement of a 30% cut in the budget for the state's cultural activities.

March 22, 1992

Honorable Dr. Vogel:

I am an American concert violinist, receiving a Master's Degree in performance at the Juilliard School in New York City. As chamber music soloist, I have concertized in most of the west European capitals, as well as throughout North America and in Southeast Asia. In February 1991 I took a concertmaster position at the Eisenach State Theater. I knew in advance that doing this involved risk; indeed that I was accepting a pioneer's challenge in which I would sacrifice a materially comfortable life for an uncomfortable one. My salary was to be 1,200 marks. To make a telephone call remains a difficult task. An hour per day is lost to the operation of the central coal heating in the cellar of our house.

My decision to come here was based upon a passionate desire to help bring about a cultural revival in a region which, until the Nazi-Communist repression, played a leading role in the development of world culture. Thuringia is still today world-famous for having laid the conditions under which man would achieve works of unsurpassed beauty in the ages to follow. The importance of Eisenach to music, as the birthplace of Bach, is somewhat comparable to the importance of Salzburg as the birthplace of Mozart. In Eisenach's Wartburg Castle, Martin Luther escaped the wrath of his ideological enemies. Today, Salzburg is glowingly beautiful, while Eisenach wallows in material poverty.

In 1990, the then-West German government developed a strategy for establishing a healthy economy in the east. To this was added measures for defending and promoting important elements of East German cultural identity. For 1992 the government of the state of Thuringia had committed 90 million marks—most of it from Bonn—as their contribution for the good of Thuringia's theaters. This would enable them to keep their doors open, nothing more. Eisenach's share was 8 million marks.

Now I appeal to you, Dr. Vogel! Early this month, a few

weeks after you replaced Mr. Duchac as prime minister, you said, "It puts me to sleep to think that in such a small state as Thuringia, fully 83 branch theaters are in existence!" Last week, it was discovered that your administration intends to reduce its contribution to 60 million marks, in order that more money be used for promoting the "economic sector."

In no way can economy benefit through the sacrifice of theater! As a teenager in California, I already witnessed the practice of such theory: When I was 12 years old, Ronald Reagan became governor. Massive cuts in funding for the arts, including those of my school, were introduced. I found other ways to continue music study, but for hundreds of fellow students, a profound demoralization took hold, which eroded the discipline, the desire to learn. By the time I graduated, the school environment had become bestialized: Drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and dropping out became commonplace. Illiteracy climbed. Several schoolmates were killed in armed clashes with other schoolmates. The son of one of my teachers was imprisoned for manslaughter. Today the official illiteracy rate in the U.S. is 19%. Is it then any wonder, that the U.S. is experiencing a profound economic downturn? By cutting art, we cut the means to build character, the will to develop our minds, the industry of the nation, the tax revenues of the state, and so on.

The great citizen of Weimar, Friedrich Schiller, said the following of theater: "Human nature cannot bear the constant, unrelenting grind of business. Surfeited with animal pleasures, weary of long exertion, man thirsts for better and finer amusement. If he does not find it, he will plunge into debauchery which hastens his ruin and destroys the peace of society. . . . The businessman is in danger of becoming a miserable hypochondriac in return for the life he has generously devoted to the nation. The scholar is likely to sink into dull pedantry, the common man becomes a brute."

The theater, as well as the other institutions of art, are the workplace for the development of our citizenry. I appeal to you, Dr. Vogel! Don't repeat the mistakes of the U.S. here in Thuringia, certainly not here in Eisenach. Restore full funding to our theaters and cultural institutions.

Very truly yours,
Seth Taylor
Eisenach