Schiller Institute

Helga Zepp-LaRouche discussed Schiller's "perfect Classical poem," "Nänie," set to music by Johannes Brahms, prior to its performance by the Schiller Institute Chorus.

Helga Zepp-LaRouche

Remarks on the Poem Nänie by Schiller

Helga Zepp-LaRouche introduced the performance of Brahms' "Nänie" ("Song of Lamentation") by the Mid-Atlantic Schiller Institute Chorus, by reciting Schiller's poem, on which the song is based, in German, followed by an English translation by Choral Director John Sigerson.

The extreme importance the Schiller Institute puts on Classical culture has everything to do with the hope to come out of this civilizational crisis, because we're not only having a financial crisis, a political crisis, a military crisis, but we have profoundly, a cultural crisis. And if we want to come out of it, we have to make Classical music and Classical poetry accessible to the population in general, because it's the only way we can make people have access to the inner source of their own creativity. And there is almost nothing else but Classical music and Classical poetry which does that.

Now, most people have no idea what "Classical" means. They think Classical music is the Rolling Stones, or some such ancient thing. And in reality, Classical art,

as it has been developed in Germany, in particular, in the Classical period, and naturally, in other countries too; but the German Classical period represented, really the highest standard in both music and poetry, and it had the very highest standard of what goes into it.

The Classical poem, for example, *Nänie*, which we hear now in a composition of Brahms, is a *perfect* Classical poem. It has every ingredient which Schiller, Goethe, and some other of the great poets who established universal, aesthetical laws, defined. It has a beautiful, poetical idea. That idea is thoroughly composed. It has a transformation to a higher idea which you cannot express in prose, and there is not one word too much.

It would require more to say, but I leave it at that, and I want to read to you, first in German, the *Nänie*, and then John Sigerson will read it in English, and then I will give you a couple of comments on it, because most people have forgotten how to open up poems. They read something written by Shakespeare or by other poets, Shelley, and they say, "This doesn't make any sense." But they don't make the effort to actually, word by word, line by line, strophe by strophe, *conquer the poem*, and that way, get inside, into what it means. And when you do that, then you will see, that it accesses the most tender, most lyrical part of your soul. And you know, poems are really the absolute, necessary way of accessing creativity. And the fact that that art is so much lost has everything to do with the present crisis in which we find ourselves.

So, I read to you this *Nänie*:

Nänie

Auch das Schöne muss sterben! Das Menschen und Götter bezwinget,
Nicht die eherne Brust rührt es des stygischen Zeus.
Einmal nur erweichte die Liebe den Schattenbeherscher,
Und an der Schwelle noch, streng, rief er zurück sein Geschenk.
Nicht stillt Aphrodite dem schönen Knaben die Wunde,
Die in den zierlichen Leib grausam der Eber geritzt.
Nicht errettet den göttlichen Held die unsterbliche Mutter,
Wann er, am skäischen Tor fallend, sein Schicksal erfüllt.
Aber sie steigt aus dem Meer mit allen Töchtern des Nereus,
Und die Klage hebt an um den verherrlichten Sohn.
Siehe! Da weinen die Götter, es weinen die Göttinnen alle,
Dass das Schöne vergeht, dass das Vollkommene stirbt.
Auch ein Klaglied zu sein im Mund der Geliebten ist herrlich,
Denn das Gemeine geht klanglos zum Orkus hinab.

[English translation:]

Nenia[1]

Even the beautiful must perish! It vanquishes men and gods alike,
Yet it moves not the steely breast of the Stygian Zeus.[2]
Only once did Love make the Lord of the Shadows relent,
But, still on the threshold, he sternly withdrew his gift.[3]
Aphrodite failed to stanch the beautiful boy's wound
Which the wild boar had gruesomely gashed into his delicate body.[4]
The divine hero could not be saved by his immortal mother[5]
When, dying at the Scaean Gate,[6] he fulfilled his fate.
And yet, she rises from the sea, with all Nereus's daughters,[7]
And lifts her voice in lament over her glorified son.
Look! The gods are weeping! All the goddesses are bemoaning
That the beautiful must pass away, that the perfect must die!
Even a song of lament in the mouth of she who is loved, is glorious,
Because tawdry goes down to Orcus[8] unsung.

1. Song of lamentation.
2. Pluto, god of the underworld.
3. Orpheus attempted to retrieve Eurydice from the underworld.
4. Venus (Aphrodite) mourning over the hunter Adonis.
5. Achilles' mother, the goddess Thetys (daughter of the sea god Nereus).
6. The gate of Troy.
7. Nereus had 50 daughters.
8. The underworld.

So, to just take the first reference to Greek mythology which Schiller uses, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice: Now, this is a very beautiful mythology, where Orpheus received from the god Apollo, the power of a beautiful singing voice, and also playing the lute so powerfully that he would not only move people to tears, but even trees and stones would be moved. He fell in love with Eurydice, who was a river nymph, and they married, but very soon she died. And then Orpheus was so completely distraught that neither prayer nor song nor anything would get him out of his sorrow, or bring her back.

So he took a decision which no human being had ever taken before. He decided to go down into the realm of the dead, to take her back, into the Tantarus, and there he talked to Hades, the ruler of the underworld, and he was singing to him of his immortal love and his pain, which was stronger than he could bear. So he called on Hades, and reminded him that he had fallen in love with his wife, Persephone, whom he had stolen from some foreign town and then married. And this had never happened before, so all the shadows of the underworld, all the mythological figures, gathered around him and listened to his beautiful singing. And even the Eumenides, the goddesses of revenge, were moved to tears by this expression of beauty and love.

Even Hades, the sinister ruler of the underworld, was moved; and then his wife, Persephone, calls the shadow of Eurydice, and tells Orpheus that his great love has moved them, and that they will fulfill his request and she can follow him—but only on one condition: He must not look back. Because if he looks back once, then he has lost Eurydice forever.

So Orpheus goes, and naturally, Eurydice follows him, but since she is a shadow, he cannot hear her. So at one point, he gets completely panicked, and he looks back, and sees that, indeed, she is there. And she looks at him for one moment, sadly, very tenderly, and at the moment when he wants to embrace her, she disappears into emptiness.

Totally beside himself, he throws himself into the Styx, which is the river that separates the underworld from the upper world, and he weeps for seven days and seven nights, but in vain: The gods remain unmoved.

Now *Nänie* is the name for the song of lament, which was a very common phenomenon in Greek mythology. Every time a great figure of mythology died, there was a song of lament, a *Nänie*. And that *Nänie*, that song of lament, became its own category of poetry.

Now, obviously, this poem, *Nänie* starts with a very emotional statement, which means something for every human being, because everybody experiences it one or more times in his life, "Even the beautiful must die!" How often have we not said, "Why is [the] beautiful dying?" It's a universal human emotion. Schiller, however, does not talk about the loss of a person; he talked about the loss of beauty, and he gives three examples: The first one is the Eurydice/Orpheus example which I mentioned, which is the beauty of Love. The second is the myth of Aphrodite, the goddess of Beauty, and her lover, the handsome youth Adonis, who is wounded by a wild boar and dies. And the third one is a reference to the death of Achilles at Troy. Achilles, in Greek mythology, was the son of Thetys, who was in turn, the daughter of Nereus, and wife of Peleus.

Now, Schiller calls Achilles "the divine hero," and his beauty is one of character, of virtue, and of bravery. He fought, but even his immortal mother could not save him. But then, she, the immortal mother, arises out of the ocean, with all of the daughters of Nereus, and they sing the *Nänie*, the song of lament for Achilles.

And then, something very beautiful happens: There is a shift in the poem. It says,

"Look! All the gods are weeping, and all the goddesses are bemoaning that beauty vanishes, that the perfect must die."

Now, the three examples Schiller gives in this poem, are all starting with a "not," in the German—it's lost in the English translation, because it requires a poet to translate a Classical poem, equally beautifully, in another language. And I'm not saying John is not a poet, I'm just saying he didn't have enough time to do it! And he wanted people to have access to a relatively difficult text.

But in the German: "Nicht die eherne Brust…"; "Nicht stillt Aphrodite…"; " Nicht errettet den göttlichen Held…." is an artistic trick with which you make sure the audience understands that it's really the same subject.

Then, in the German, there are also very beautiful forms, like *Distischen,* which is a sequence of hexameter and pentameter, and in German, the word *Dichtung* [poetry] has a very special meaning: *Dicht* means dense or intense, so *Dichtung* means intensification. So you intensify the prose in such a way that you arrive at a higher level.

So, in the first case, even the beautiful must die, and all the gods and goddesses weep. The beauty has not died, because—and this is where the transformation occurs—in the song of lament, the beautiful becomes

immortal: So the subject of the poem is not the loss of beauty, because the beauty is in *Nänie*, in the song of lament, in the poetry. Because the mean, the tawdry, vanished without a song, into Orcus.

Beauty, in Art, Is Immortal

Now, what is said here is that beauty, in art, is immortal. Even where death destroys the beautiful, the beautiful reappears in the art, and that is obviously also true for every person who contributed something with his or her life, to the immortality of the species of mankind, and its progress.

Now, Nicholas of Cusa said that the soul is the place where all science and all art is created, and the fact that the science created, the art created, *is* immortal, that means also that it's an absolute proof that the soul is immortal, because obviously that which creates is of a higher order than the created. So once a soul creates immortal things, the soul is immortal.

Beauty in all of this is extremely important, because Schiller, in several poems and writings, talks about the conflict between lust—the joy in the here and now, the joy of the senses—and the beauty of the mind, which is related to universal principles and to immortality. And he struggles, and conveyed that struggle, that in order to be a universal mind, to be a philosophical mind, to be a beautiful soul, to be a genius, you have to resolve that conflict, because if your mind is demanding one thing, and your emotions are telling you something else, you cannot resolve it. And if you only follow the duty, then you end up like Immanuel Kant: You become one of the Kantian types who do their duty, but are totally joyless.

So Schiller resolves that by saying that beauty is the realm where the conflict between the happiness of the senses and happiness of the soul is overcome, because without any question beauty belongs to the realm of the senses: You can feel it, you can see it, you can enjoy it with your emotions, but it is also something which affects the mind. So it is therefore that which resolves that conflict, and that has everything to do with the need for an aesthetical education of civilization. And it has been a total conviction of the Schiller Institute, and one of the reasons why it was founded, that we have to educate mankind *aesthetically*, because the barbarism which we see today in the world, is just a complete lack of that kind of aesthetical education.

So therefore, I ask you all, help us to spread Classical culture, because only if you love Classical culture, are people truly human.