

“Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar...”

Text read on 14th July, 2022 during the conference “The Evolution of Knowledge”

The last time I met Jürgen Renn (it was during a nice walk in Berlin’s Tiergarten), I asked him what gave him that charge of optimism that is one of his finest qualities. I inquired because I myself tend more and more to pessimism, against which I nevertheless try to fight.

Why? Because after a lifetime, in which I have thought and hoped that we had left behind the scariest part of human history, I have to change my mind and resign myself to the fact that some basic characteristics of humankind, at least in these last hundreds of thousands of years, have not changed. In fact, we are still in what I call “The Age of War”, the era that includes all the periods within the Holocene and also the period in which we find ourselves, the Anthropocene: actually, they are all sub-periods of this age. Will we ever succeed in getting out of it? Violence, oppression, war: are they unavoidable characteristics of humankind? Or will there perhaps be – in hundreds or thousands or hundreds of thousands of years – an age in which the present one will be considered as the true prehistory of humanity? We have to admit that we cannot be sure that, in this hypothetical and distant era, human beings will still exist.

At the moment, the narrative that humanity has fashioned of itself and of the God it has invented in its image and likeness does not bode well. It explains and justifies, in a fabulous way, the nature and destiny of humanity. Indeed, everything depends on Adam and Eve and their – human, all-too human – disobedience. One thing leads to another: from Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel were born. Among the descendants of Cain there is Iubal, considered the inventor of music. This casts a shadow on an art that is considered the symbol of beauty and purity. It is. And it isn't. In the same way that man is wonderful and brilliant, he is also stupid, terrible, and highly dangerous. Sometimes in the same person. Take the case of

Richard Wagner, an intense and outspoken anti-Semite, whom Thomas Mann called “ein Ungeheuer von Genie” (a monster of genius), the author – besides some masterpieces of all time – of the infamous pamphlet “Das Judentum in der Musik” (Judaism in Music). When, in Vienna in 1881, during a performance of Lessing’s *Nathan der Weise*, a play on religious tolerance among Jews, Christians and Muslims, the theater burned down, Wagner said: “All Jews should be burned during a performance of *Nathan*”¹.

Coming back to Cain and his descendants, I think also of a half-brother of Iubal, Tubal-Cain, who is credited with inventing weapons. The Bible commentator Rashi (acronym of Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi, 1040-1105) interprets his name (Tubal-Cain) as the one who would “aromatize [he uses this curious term, sometimes also translated as ‘spicy’] and redefined the profession of Cain by making weapons for assassins.”

In short, due to the unbecoming behavior of Adam and Eve, humanity was not born under the best auspices and that its path seems to be predestined, over the centuries and millennia, until Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which has now been going on for almost five months and threatens to ignite a new world war.²

This is a reason for pessimism. Of course, we must consider that everything is in constant motion. Humans themselves, having arrived on Earth with things substantially done, have not stopped for a moment since then – although often giving the impression of spinning in circles – and there is no doubt that in the course of these 250,000 (or even 500,000 years), they made tremendous progress. Especially in the last thousands of years and in particular in the last hundred years. We live today in a world that, despite its eyesores, is absolutely magical. People normally do things that in the past not even a god or goddess would have dreamed of being able to do.

¹ I dedicated to the specific theme of anti-Semitism, my composition *Warum?* for string quartet (2006). A few years later I also made a version of it in which information on the two-thousand-year history of anti-Semitism, from Paul of Tarsus to the present day, is interpolated between the movements.

² I read this text on July 13, 2022.

This is undoubtedly a reason for optimism. Though that optimism must remain severely limited, because in many parts of the globe – and also next to and among us – we continue to hate, to fight, to annihilate each other. After all, we are still in the Age of War. But what is this instinct of destruction and self-destruction, which turns against one's fellowmen, against other animals and against our own home, this wonderful planet that in a short time humanity has depleted and half destroyed?!

A few days ago, I read an interview with Jürgen Renn published in *Die Zeit*³, which announced the creation of a new institute, the “Max-Planck-Institut für Geoanthropologie,” which will be based in the city of Jena and will study the interrelationships between the geosphere and man-made systems⁴. This is great news, and I am sure that important impulses for the defense of our planet will come from this institute.

What, if any, can be the role of art and music to help make the Earth an increasingly habitable place, not just for those who are already lacking for nothing, but for everyone? Alas, music that once seems to have been powerful (see Jericho and the seven trumpets – actually seven shofars⁵) has meanwhile weakened considerably.⁶ And in any case, it cannot intervene directly and immediately. Music's message may not reach its audiences for a long time. It is like a message in the bottle, which, if read by someone, must be put back in the bottle and entrusted again to the waves of history. But its effectiveness is uncertain and often disappointing. Schiller's wish, amplified by Beethoven in his *Ninth Symphony*, “Alle Menschen werden Brüder” (all men become brothers), is still, despite being ritually repeated

³ <https://www.zeit.de/2022/27/juergen-renn-max-planck-institut-mensch-erde>

⁴ <https://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/news/max-planck-institute-geoanthropology-be-directed-jurgen-renn>

⁵ A ritual musical instrument, made from the horn of a ram or other animal, used on important Jewish public and religious occasions.

⁶ See also my *About the power of music and the powerlessness of composers*. German and English Versions in: Hanse Institute for Advanced Study. Annual Report 1999, p. 56-66 and 67-73. Spanish version: *De la potencia de la música y la impotencia de los compositores*, in Cuadernos de Veruela. Anuario de creación musical, 3, 1999, p. 35-51. German version: *Von der Macht der Musik und der Ohnmacht der Komponisten*, in Merkur. Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken, LIV, 2, April 2000, p. 312-323. The issue is also addressed in „The Artist and the Power: Remarks on my Operas *Faust* and *Dmitri*,” in Luca Lombardi, *Construction of Freedom and Other Writings*, ed. Jürgen Thym (Baden-Baden: Valentin Koerner Verlag, 2006), 269-84.

ad nauseam, a utopian program. And then: brothers, yes, but possibly not like Cain and Abel. And then, again: The *Ninth Symphony* was one of Hitler's favorite pieces. What does this tell us?

Still, these testimonies of great men of history are what prevents us from giving up hope. I am thinking, in addition to Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* or his opera *Fidelio*, for example, of Schönberg's *A Survivor of Warsaw*; of the *Babi Yar Symphony*, to texts by Yevtushenko, by Shostakovich; of Britten's *War Requiem*; of the opera *Il Prigioniero* by Dallapiccola; of *Il canto sospeso* by Nono; of *Ich wandte mich und sah alles Unrecht, das geschah unter der Sonne* (I turned and saw all the wrongs that took place under the sun), Bernd Alois Zimmermann's last composition before his suicide.

This does not mean that every composition must have a civil or political message. Life is made up of many different aspects and it is right that music reflects them all. There is music and music. In any case, the music of the great composers of the past is, beyond any extra-musical program, an implicit anticipation of a different world, which you don't know if it will ever happen – a sliver of utopia. But there are moments in which an artist cannot close his eyes to reality, but he must take a stand, because “music is not an ark on which one can survive the flood” (Brecht). Nor can we fatalistically wait for the catastrophe, but – albeit with the weak but vital means of music – make our contribution to avoid it.

Finally, I will speak briefly about the musical moment that the excellent pianist Alessandra Ammara will realize. I have chosen three short piano compositions of mine: the first is *Albumblätter*, which I wrote at the turn of 1967/68. I was 22 years old and it was the first composition in which I confronted myself with the avant-garde of the time, even before going to Cologne – at that time the "Mecca" of New Music – to study with Karlheinz Stockhausen and Bernd Alois Zimmermann, two composers, very different from each other.

The second is a piece I wrote, back in 2002, for the 50th birthday of Wolfgang Rihm, one of the major German composers of today. This piece is part of a cycle entitled *8 Saluti* (8 greetings).

The third is from 2014 and is called *Mendelssohn im jüdischen Museum Berlin* (Mendelssohn at the Jewish Museum of Berlin), where it had its first performance by Roberto Prosseda (husband of Alessandra Ammara and himself an excellent pianist). It is one of my many compositions dedicated to Jewish themes and to the memory of the tragedies that the Jewish people have suffered due to human wickedness and stupidity (qualities that are, alas, stubbornly persistent).

Judaism and the fight against anti-Semitism form an important strand of my work, to which belongs also my most recent composition, *Novembernacht*, in memory of the 1938 "Pogromnacht" in Germany. I wrote it for András Schiff, one of the great pianists of our time.⁷

Another strong interest of mine is that of our planet, nature, and all other animals. I consider the latter being similar to humans, though of course also different from us, and also therefore I have become vegetarian for many years now.

I have great respect for life, in all its forms. I could say that, even not being a believer, this is my personal religion. To this strand of my interests belong compositions such as *Infra* for ensemble (which I wrote on behalf of a scientific institution⁸) or *Terra* (earth) and *Mare* (sea), two orchestral compositions which I would like to follow up in the near future with *Vento* (wind) and *Sole* (sun).

Alessandra Ammara has also brought with her two miniatures of mine, written in the last few weeks: the first is called *My Hope for Ukraine*.⁹

⁷ The premiere is scheduled for June 27, 2023 in Bochum (Ruhr Piano Festival).

⁸ For the inauguration (in 1997) of the "Hanse Institute for Advanced Study" in Delmenhorst, Lower Saxony).

⁹ In this piece I paraphrase the Israeli anthem, HaTikvah (The Hope), expressing in this way also my hope for

The same word (hope) also recurs in the other piece, *Sorge und Hoffnung* (worry – I could also translate it as anguish, distress or anxiety – and hope).¹⁰

After this reflection that I shared with all of you in this marvelous venue¹¹, I would like to return to my conversation with Jürgen Renn I mentioned at the beginning, I have come to the conclusion that the alternative is not between optimism and pessimism. Rather, we must continue walking, inventing the road ourselves, as suggested by the title of this text, which I took from a poem by Antonio Machado (“Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar ...” – wanderer, there is no way, the path is created by walking ...).¹² We must proceed along the path that we create along the way, with realism, trying – “trotz alledem” (despite everything) – not to lose hope.

Naming this word makes me think of when, as a boy, I accompanied on the piano the wife of a friend of our family, the sociologist Franco Ferrarotti, who interpreted an aria by Alessandro Scarlatti: “La speranza, mi tradisce, mi si mostra e poi svanisce...” (hope betrays me, shows itself and then disappears...)¹³

Luca Lombardi
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my second fatherland (or rather, motherland).

¹⁰ I wrote it for the forthcoming 80th birthday of a dear friend, the musicologist Jürgen Thym.

¹¹ The speech and the concert took place in the Miramare Castle Park (Trieste), at sunset, in front of the sea.

¹² The poem by Machado is from 1907. The composer Luigi Nono tells that in the mid-1980s he visited a monastery near Toledo and on a wall there saw the inscription, “Caminantes, no hay caminos. Hay que caminar” (Walker, there is no path, yet you must walk), which is strongly reminiscent of Machado’s verse. In the last three years of his life, Nono composed a trilogy of works whose titles all derive from that inscription: *Caminantes.....Ayacucho* (1986-87 – Ayacucho is a city in southern Peru that was the scene of a rebellion against the Spanish in the early 19th century), *No hay caminos, hay que caminar.....Andrej Tarkowskij* (1987), and, his last composition, “*Hay que caminar*” *soñando* (1989). Strange enough, he didn’t mention Antonio Machado, whom he certainly was aware of. There is, however, a significant difference between the two quotes: Machado says that the road must be created as one proceeds, thus assigning the choice of the path and its destination to the wanderer himself. In the sentence quoted by Nono, instead, there is no choice, one must walk, wherever the path leads... I would say that this version, rather than pessimistic, is desperate. But how and why to live if you are hopeless? It is probably no coincidence that Nono wrote these compositions, already ill, at the end of his life.

¹³ In Trieste I took the liberty of singing this quote.