



## HITTING THE RIGHT KEYS THOMAS CHRISTENSEN

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The great myths of our culture need to be retold and reread again and again over the generations. Wiko is such a myth, one you can read about in the pages of this volume and its many predecessors. There you will hear tales both wondrous and incredible about a group of scholars that gathers each year in Grunewald: the lively intellectual exchange

that takes place at the legendary lunches and colloquia, the incomparable hospitality offered by the solicitous staff, and the magical setting of Berlin itself. It is a story that has been told many times. Hopefully it will be told many times in the future. And I, too, now gratefully join the lineage of peripatetic bards who sing their praises to Wiko.

I arrived in Berlin with my family on a warm sunny day in August and, within an hour of our moving into our comfortable apartment overlooking the bucolic Herthasee, realized that this was going to be a very special year. Our son and daughter ran outside to the back of Villa Walther and immediately struck up friendships (and a soccer game) with some other children who had just moved in. My wife and I soon met the family of one Fellow who would be our neighbors. And before long, we were already journeying out together to test a few restaurants in the neighborhood (and in the process discovering the joys of sipping a cool Berliner Weiße on a warm, late summer evening). Sometime during this first week, I learned that there was a performance of Mahler's Eighth Symphony at the Philharmonie that we decided we couldn't miss despite our jet lag. (Miraculously we were able to find two tickets thanks to the energetic phone calls of Vera at the Wiko reception desk.) The concert was a transcendent experience – a symphony of apophysis serving as an overture to our residency at Wiko. Yes, this was going to be a great year.

But little did I know how catalytic my stay at Wiko would be for my own work in musicology. I came here to write a book on an issue that had preoccupied me for some time: conceptions of musical tonality during the long 19th century. But the topic of the monograph I wished to write was ill-formed in my mind; I needed the time and space to reflect on it more profoundly. And for sure, my residence here provided me that. But I also got something more that I hadn't bargained for: a critical community that contributed in innumerable and unexpectedly positive ways to my project.

Of course we all come from communities, academic, familial, residential. But there is something special about the ecology of Wiko that helps create a kind of space that was new to me. It is a community that I might characterize as the long conversation. For over the prolonged period of our time together, most of us were able to establish a comfort – one might even say intimacy – with colleagues that allowed for the most profound kinds of critical conversation. It turned out to be an education for us all.

The conversations we had unfolded over many places and times. To be sure, there were the canonical Tuesday colloquia with their lively question and answer periods. But just as important were the informal lunch conversations that often stretched well into the

afternoon, as well as the convivial Thursday evening dinners. (A few of those stretched mightily late into the night, too, aided by those bottles of Chateau Castillon.) Then there were the quotidian encounters with Fellows: our trips on the M19 together, drinks on Friday night at the restaurant Floh, bike rides through the Grunewald, walks to our German class ... Little by little, Fellows became friends, queries became questions, and dialogue became debate. Inhibitions quickly fell away and you would find yourself discoursing – and perhaps arguing – with experts on topics that you would otherwise have had no business talking about. (Where else could I have had the *Chutzpah* to tell Alfred Brendel one evening that his skepticism regarding the worth of Liszt's opera transcriptions was surely misguided?) It was a liberating time.

Of course, many of us are lucky enough to come from institutions where we can converse with colleagues from diverse fields. But never before have I been able to study so close up the workings of scholars in so many differing areas – and then have opportunity to interrogate them concerning what I saw: to watch historians in medieval theology attempt to piece together their stories from the fragmentary evidence of deteriorating manuscripts; to see the rigorous evaluation of genealogical evidence my colleagues in evolutionary biology brought to their studies; to marvel at the subtle hermeneutics literary colleagues applied to the texts they read. Far from feeling isolated in my own small sub-discipline of historical musicology, I began to feel truly a part of an intellectual community unlike any other that I had hitherto belonged to.

Perhaps the most useful part of this process came when I attempted to describe my own work to colleagues not in my own field. For in explaining to a non-specialist just what musicians mean by the elusive concept of tonality, I was forced to step outside of the comfortable conceptual frames and technical languages of my discipline. Tonality, I would say, was more than just the sum of its empirical elements: the notes of a composition, the scales upon which a melody is drawn, the harmonies one finds. It might be partly these, to be sure. But it is also something more, yet at the same time, something far less tangible. Call it a special kind of style or “tone” one hears in a piece of music; call it that ineffable, dynamic excitement that you feel when all the performers of some ensemble are “in sync” with one another. (Jazz pianists sometimes speak of hitting all the right keys.) In short, tonality is less a collection of objective attributes than it is a certain feeling, a certain quality of play.

In many ways, this description reminds me of Wiko. For we too were more than the sum of our individual parts; we were all members of a virtual music ensemble, voices in a

fugue playing in counterpoint with one another producing riotous harmony and melody. (And at the risk of pushing this hackneyed metaphor to the breaking point, might we designate Luca Giuliani as our intellectual conductor?) For in the process of living and working together, a certain kind of feel – perhaps a certain kind of tonality – developed within our own community. It was sometimes hard for us to identify concretely; yet we all began to experience it.

Thanks to my time at Wiko and the critical feedback I received from so many Fellows here, my project started to jell. I was able to sketch out a structure for my book and finish drafts for four (of the seven planned) chapters. (Incidentally, I cannot thank the library staff enough for their efforts in tracking down some extraordinarily obscure publications from the 19th century that proved catalytic to my research.) I must also thank Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, who repeatedly pestered me to propose a workshop while here. I’m glad he did (and grateful for the generous support of Wiko for funding the proposal). It proved to be an ideal culmination of my research, helping me test many of my ideas in front of an extraordinary gathering of invited scholars. All in all, it was one of the most productive scholarly years I have ever experienced.

This is not to say that all my work proceeded without distraction. Obstacles presented themselves. For example, I promised myself – in vain, as it turned out – to avoid committing to too many conferences or invited papers that would require travel and divert me from my work. (Truth be told, I came to value the camaraderie of our social time together far more than the lure of any travel, and I soon came to resent the time I had to spend outside of our friendly community.) But what I resented most of all as surely the most disruptive to my work schedule – and pocketbook – was the city of Berlin itself, which kept seducing my wife and me almost every weekend to some enticing opera or concert. It was devious and infuriating. I don’t know with what right any city should be able to support no less than three opera houses and some half-dozen professional orchestras. Future Fellows who love music be forewarned. Berlin is a dangerous city for you.

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I write these lines as my time at Wiko is now coming to an end. Melancholia fills the air, and I note that our conversations over lunch have become notably more subdued. We all are filled with dread about our imminent expulsion from paradise. Even my children have asked me plaintively why we can’t stay on just one more year. When I was about to

depart from Chicago last August to begin my Wiko residence, I was warned by a former Fellow that this would happen; our time would quickly fly by, and we'd be miserably sad at the prospect of its ending. And sure enough, this came to pass. We'll miss our new-found friends from around the globe and our lively table conversations. But we all know, too, that it is now the turn of a new class of Fellows to experience the myth of Wiko for themselves; we will only have our memories to hold on to. Still, like the feeling you get when the last notes of a great symphony die away at the end of a memorable concert performance, you feel you have been through a remarkable journey; a subtle warmth fills your breast. Perhaps you're not sure what it all means. But you know it was profound and the music will stay with you long after you go home. You know the tonality was true and all the right keys were hit.