



PURPOSEFUL PLAY AT WIKO
– THE WISSENSCHAFTSKOLLEG –
“KINDERGARTEN OF THE GODS”
PAUL ROBERTSON

For well over 40 years, Professor Paul Robertson performed throughout the world as leader of the internationally renowned Medici String Quartet, of which he was a founding member. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and Visiting Professor in Music and Medicine to the Peninsula Medical School, he is also Visiting Fellow of Green, Templeton College, Oxford. He is also a member of the European Cultural Parliament and Associate of the Royal Society of Medicine. During the 1990s he played a significant role in educating the public about the burgeoning role of brain science in Music. This work reached a wide public with his highly acclaimed Channel 4 television series “Music and the Mind”. Paul has presented a number of “special feature” programmes for Radio 4, the most recent of which, “Hearing Ragas”, explored his coma experience and the late Sir John Tavener’s masterpiece “Towards Silence”. For a number of years, he was a Cultural Leader at the World Economic Forum. In 2001, Paul was awarded a fellowship by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts [NESTA]. In 2004, he was inaugurated as Visiting Professor in Art and Leadership to the Copenhagen Business School. Following severe health problems, Paul now focuses upon supporting his wife Chika as joint CEO of the Music Mind Spirit Trust, based from their home in Sussex (see: MusicMindSpirit.org). – Address: St. Hugh’s College, University of Oxford, St Margaret’s Road, Oxford, OX2 6LE, United Kingdom.
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In a perfect world, everyone would be granted a stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg – surely the most apt compensation for having been born human. The elegance of such “largesse”

would be that it would constitute either a visitation to heaven or to hell according to the sensibilities of the recipient.

This special year's grace with all its possibilities and opportunities for meeting and assimilating new ideas, disciplines and influences, as well as for reflecting upon them, marks a "rite of passage" for many Fellows. Such significant punctuations of life take on a different aspect, according to how and when they occur. For the younger Fellow, the heady mixture of intellectual intoxication and challenge must prove seminal. For those midstream in their career, it offers a wonderful enrichment and respite, whilst for those of us approaching their "*philosopod*"* years, it is a heady yet humbling glimpse into what our science or arena of expertise may look like in future generations.

In my case, serious illness had accelerated my passage into *philosopodactics* or *philosopodiatry*(?). Obligated by continuing health issues to discard my professional life as a performing musician and unable even to continue my various previous teaching roles (in both Leadership and the Medical Humanities), I arrived in Berlin feeling frail but with a clear and optimistic agenda.

One key part was to complete a book and hope to find a literary agent to take it on. Another was to exorcise the many Jewish "ghosts" I continued to carry about Germany in general and Berlin in particular.

In my case, my fellowship became possible purely by serendipity, which is always a good sign in my experience. Simple online research made it immediately and reassuringly clear that the ethos and membership of the Kolleg is extremely "inclusive" and that its Fellows are chosen irrespective of their race, colour or creed. However, the excellence and high accomplishment of the Fellows was also evident.

Following all sorts of medical delays, I was finally able to make my way to Wiko only far into the academic year (as late on as April). The patience and supportive attitude of the Kolleg authorities was evident all through this somewhat tortuous process, as it was to be throughout my stay. As someone with health problems, I cannot begin to express how utterly delightful and enabling all the Wiko staff were and continued to be throughout my stay. I do thank you all.

In fact the assumption of the whole Wiko team – "front of house", technical, academic, "support", catering etc. – was that Fellows are honoured guests to be made welcome and

* N.B.: A "philosopod" is apparently a newly coined term describing how academics of a certain age and maturity increasingly drift into philosophising!

looked after in every particular. This naturally establishes as the norm the highest level of gracious behaviour from everyone – a rare and altogether desirable model of community life daily enacted in leafy and beautiful Grunewald.

It hardly needs to be said that the level and variety of intellectual company is unsurpassed. However, I imagine each year produces a very different composition. As in cuisine or musical composition – varying ingredients synthesise into a unique set of flavours in this wonderful annual Wiko dish.

In my year there were two central intellectual “hubs” – one based upon Quantification and Assessment and therefore largely social/mathematic in flavour (although also delightfully endowed with many memorably sanguine characters). Another, complementary grouping consisted of a scintillating and radical group of evolutionary biologists studying cancer – at once intense and fun-loving. Swimming within and between these two central “amoebic” structures were a number of artists, legal and economic specialists, historians etc. These ameliorated, negotiated, neglected or galvanised each other as occasion demanded. Again, I was much struck by the fact that these high-powered academics, so adept at the cut and thrust of university politics, competitive research and academic empire-building, were so able and willing to put aside their habitual intellectual carapaces and make themselves so generously open to discussion, debate and new ideas. Of course, in that sense Fellows of the Wissenschaftskolleg are “on holiday”, and it was delightful to see these sophisticated individuals “disrobe” and reveal their underlying passion and enthusiasm for the beauty of ideas. This special environment allowed even the most defensive individuals to re-inhabit their essential “childlike” (as opposed to “childish”) wonderment of being in the world and exploring it without prejudice. Was it only my imagination that, whilst here, many of them could be observed wandering about with eyes widened – just as children do?

It gradually dawned on me that this was indeed a very special kindergarten – a place of safety for the enquiring mind. A high degree of trust is required to create such a precious space and once again I would comment upon the very high level of care shown by the Wiko staff. As something of a student of Leadership Studies, I also recognise that such an environment of attentive “mindfulness” is necessarily set by the senior leaders of the College, the Rector Luca and Head of Fellows Reinhart, together with their other senior colleagues and Board etc. Theirs was a light but adept touch – always by example (the only kind that finally carries integrity and effectiveness).

Along with the broader abundant ideas and concepts came smaller yet equally significant “consolations”: – one, for example which I particularly cherished – the discovery that

the supposed “pig-like” busts of Socrates (which embellish so many editions of Plato’s accounts of his work) are in no way representative of his true appearance, but much more likely a “Satyric” parody by which his ideas and person could be honoured without incurring the wrath of the contemporary Athenian authorities. Such insights and many, many more were the delight of the weekly seminars. However, wonderful lectures and events take place virtually all day every day – and self-discipline is required!

... and what of my own aims and preoccupations?

Much enriched by varied stimulating conversations and new concepts, my book was indeed completed and taken up by a leading literary agent. Only time will now reveal whether it can become something of merit.

From a place of pretty deep introspection (and frankly, post-trauma depression), the wonderful mixture of constant (but never intrusive) intellectual stimulus, together with regular inspirational drafts of the exceptionally high-calibre musical culture unique to Berlin, my mood gradually lifted into something approaching normal. Thank God.

The ghosts of horrors past also gradually ameliorated as I discovered that Berlin is a place that has honourably (and even beautifully) acknowledged its terrible recent history. The many discreet but powerful monuments that are everywhere present, together with an overwhelming sense of memory for the crimes of yesteryear render this one of the healthiest societies I have visited. In fact, there is a care and vigilance in German democracy that could teach the UK some really important and much-needed lessons right now. I pray they do!

My final comment to you is: should the opportunity to become a Fellow come your way – accept quickly, eagerly and with alacrity. You would be mad not to!