



SO LATE OUR HAPPY SEAT...
BENEDICT TAYLOR

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I am far from the first, and will almost certainly not be the last, to start my report on my time at the Wiko on a distinct note of sadness. Many Fellows look back on the ten months spent in the leafy haven of Grunewald from a perspective poised between gratitude for its brief existence and regret at its passing. Past Fellows have written far more lyrically and

eloquently than me in their own yearbook reports about the wonders of the Wiko, the joys of intellectual companionship, the friendships formed among the fellowship, the ever-helpful, ever-responsive, ever-friendly staff, the varied excursions around the lakes and villas of Grunewald, the rich pickings of Berlin's cultural life. Nevertheless, these virtues all bear reiterating. It is an oasis. We are taken care of and given opportunities that are rarely met in our normal academic lives. Few of us, I suppose, can return to anything like this level of academic freedom, scholarly support, and intellectual discovery at the end of our fellowship, if we can indeed return home at all. As the way of things, this halcyon time is inevitably transient. But to have given a taste of this then have it taken away is cruel! After Wiko, who can bear the onslaught of e-mails, a life at the beck and call of university administrators, having to go to a library for oneself to find a book? (At a stretch, I suppose, some of us might be able to cook a couple of boiled eggs for lunch...)

What makes this much harder for our year, however, is that we barely had half of our allocated time before global disaster struck. One would like to think that any previous year would have been easier to bear, for at least we would have got our full period in paradise before expulsion. I feel an undeniable twinge of envy hearing former Fellows tell of the joys of spring and summer in Grunewald, of lunches and dinners on the terrace at Wallotstraße, and of drinks well into the night in the surrounding cafés and *Kneipen*. Many of the contacts sought and developed in the surrounding Berlin environment were also cut off just as they were coming to fruition; a slew of colloquia I had scheduled for late spring all fell by the wayside. The opening out right at the end, just as most were having to think of ways of finding their way back home, was as welcome as it was unexpected, but too late to salvage much from the wreckage of the year.

I arrived in Grunewald one late afternoon towards the end of August; during that sultry evening unpacking the varied boxes that had safely arrived from Britain, I turned on the radio; surely that was the *Lulu* Suite, and Beethoven's Ninth followed. It was the opening concert of Kirill Petrenko's first season at the helm of the Berlin Philharmonic, live from the Philharmonie a couple of miles away. Quite an auspicious start. And I was immediately won over by the airy top-floor apartment at Villa Walther, the canopy of leaves and gleaming lake below, and how the Wiko staff was there to help us as much as possible (a concept almost unknown in some other places...). The following morning I must have had a grin a mile wide as I began my reading for the coming year over a leisurely treetop breakfast on the balcony; it had been years since I last felt as welcomed and privileged to be at a place. Yet by the end, I found myself packing up my boxes once again

– those few that would actually make it home – one rainy June afternoon, to the vanishing sounds of Vaughan Williams’s Sixth Symphony. Beethoven 9 to VW6 probably says something about the course of humanity’s hopes in the last two centuries; in my more pessimistic moods, it seemed strangely appropriate for the year, too.

What did I actually achieve this year? Truth be told, far less than I ever expected. One could make a list of chapters written, papers prepared, proofs corrected, though I fear it would be fairly desultory, and worse, tedious for any reader. Yes, I finished a monograph that I had needed to finish for years; I even gave a Tuesday Colloquium on it early in October, to more or less universal incomprehension. That was a clear mistake. (Recommendation to future Fellows: don’t present in the first few weeks. Unless you’re charming, charismatic, and a bit of a genius. Most colleagues fit that description much better than me.) But it seemed a surprising struggle, and since the end of the autumn, I was unable to get the time or space to write anything new, even though editing and revising soldiered on. For one thing that I did struggle with, and speaking to other Fellows reassured me I was not the only one, was getting a proper working rhythm established. The balance between the various Wiko events, work, and the demands of family is not always easy. I guiltily stopped going to my German classes (my German, indeed, probably got even worse in the year at the Wiko, owing to the universal use of English as our *lingua franca*, a deplorable tendency to which I indolently succumbed), and I missed several of the events that I would otherwise have liked to go to in a desperate attempt to get some work done (in particular, the Frictionless Fruit Forums seemed a potential banana skin it was wise to avoid slipping on). “Once the book is finished,” so I justified it to myself, “I’ll start attending all the rich intellectual life the Wiko has to offer.” That would have been from the early months of 2020, and the world had other things in store. Maybe it would never have happened anyway... As things reopened in June, I attempted to make up for all the lost time by getting the wonderful Wiko library to obtain as many of the musical scores as possible for the project I should have started months earlier, which are sitting on my computer and (so it seems) looking back at me expecting an answer that they’ll probably not get now. Still, the world continues spinning on its axis, so I don’t think any harm has really been done.

Rather more interesting would be a trawl through programmes and used tickets to see all the concerts and operas I managed to attend until that universal hiatus at the start of March. Having lived a decade ago in Berlin for two and a half years, and having gone to the Philharmonie only about ten times in that period, I soon made up for my unaccountable

omissions, doubling that tally in a few months. And I was one of the less-active concertgoers among Fellows in our year. At times I wondered whether these cultural excursions were taking too much time away from work; but given the circumstances ever since, I don't regret going to a single one. (Well, maybe one or two of Barenboim's more perfunctory efforts, though this was partly redeemed by some excellent Elgar.) As concert- and opera-going faded into a memory, we stranded Fellows used to try to placate ourselves by recalling our favourite performances of the year. (As far as I was concerned, it was Blomstedt, though there were so many to choose between.) Lunches and dinners, in the months they were operational in the Wiko cafeteria, were another topic that evoked mixed memories. The quality varied quite widely, though there were some highpoints, and Thursday dinners were always something to look forward to; I was also quite impressed that, contrary to my initial scepticism, Dunia did introduce us to one quite nice German red wine. I still have a bottle. Perhaps the achievement I was proudest of, however, was coming out of the year without developing any further on my person the infamous *Wiko-Bauch*.

I will largely pass over directly addressing the elephant in the room, the dreaded C-word, as something of which we have surely heard enough and that has affected us all for the worse, though I will note our deep gratitude to the Wiko for trying as gamely as possible to carry on when all around was falling apart. What I did notice, however, was how, despite agreeing with other Fellows within our permitted sorties into the budding Grunewald (conveyed across a healthy 1.5-metre *Abstand*, naturally, and in pairs, just like Noah's menagerie), that we really must stop discussing this interminable topic, we still carried on talking about it. Looking at the rising tide of figures for different countries took on a ghoulish glee, especially given the dubious pride one could feel at one's own country for leaping up the world league tables, and that sense of fragile *Schadenfreude* certain native English-speakers could feel observing the incompetent bungling of an already unwanted government.

Elephants, however, presumably went into the ark in pairs, and amidst life, death, and universal chaos, there was one much more joyous event in the spring that I have also not yet mentioned. I will not dwell on it at length either, suffice it to say that the cheerful reassurance of one or two other Fellows that I would become ten times more efficient after the arrival of a baby does not seem to have come to pass yet. But perhaps the abiding reflection of the year at the Wiko is of the enormous generosity and sheer happiness of the other Fellows and their families at the birth of Alexander. We were really unprepared for all the kindness and help that came unstintingly from all directions, and I would like to

take this opportunity to thank the Fellows and staff (and not least Felix) once again for everything they did. Alexander seems to like elephants – at least of the miniature soft-toy variety – and this would be a much nicer elephant to leave in the room, waiting patiently by the side of the cot for him to wake once again.