



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
Grand opening of the Elbphilharmonie
in Hamburg
11 January 2017**

How pleased I am to be with all of you here in Hamburg. The citizens of this city, and many people throughout Germany, have waited a long time for this moment. Now that it has finally arrived, our initial reaction is that we are overwhelmed. That at least is how I felt upon entering this building. What a space this is, one that impressively focuses all attention on the music. What beautiful acoustics here in this musical amphitheatre. I am truly delighted to be able to inaugurate this building, the Elbphilharmonie, together with you.

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, the great son of this city and whose Ruy Blas overture we will hear soon, was twelve years old when he first travelled to Weimar to visit Goethe. Deeply impressed by this meeting, he wrote a letter home to tell his family about it. It opened with the words:

"Now everybody, really everybody, please listen."

That is what, this evening, the Elbphilharmonie also appears to be calling out to the citizens of Hamburg – proudly and ceremoniously, in a cheerful and charming voice that is both authoritative and enticing. As if, after so many years in the making, the Elbphilharmonie finally wants to show what it is capable of:

"Now everybody, really everybody, please listen."

Because this evening we are inaugurating a building that already has a long history. The Elbphilharmonie has been both a dream and a nightmare, world famous as well as a running joke, an embarrassment and a miracle. It is astounding how many things have been said and written about it. So much has been insinuated into the red brick warehouse atop which sits a floating crystal structure. This building has evoked strong and ambivalent emotions before a single note was even played in it.

Nevertheless, the Elbphilharmonie has remained just as attractive, and it grows even more so every day. It thrives, among other things, on contrasts and aesthetic tension that can time and again produce new experiences. The harbour and the city, the mountains and the sea, tradition and modernity, art and profit – it embodies and unites all these contrasting elements. It is truly unique, this building that sits in a river and now begs to be discovered and filled with life.

The mayor has just described the significance of the Elbphilharmonie for his city, and the architect will soon introduce us to the secrets of his building. For my part, I want to briefly share with you what it means to me, as a citizen of this country, and as Federal President.

First, to me the Elbphilharmonie is a symbol of civic engagement. Because it would not be here today were it not for a single citizen's idea and a private initiative. The Elbphilharmonie came to be also thanks to hundreds of citizens whose donations supported its construction and musical programme. I know who some of these are, they are seated before me right now. Many of you I do not know personally, but I am equally grateful to you. I am so very pleased by this commitment, for it is a manifest expression of a long-standing attitude in the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, one that draws strength from the humanist tradition of the Enlightenment. It is this civic commitment that we are more in need of today than ever before and that we must have if we want to jointly shape the future – in this city, in our country and throughout the European Union.

It is important that committed citizens also have occasions to celebrate. And today is one such occasion. It reminds us not only that this tremendous and beautiful project was created by and for the citizens of Hamburg, to bring joy to the people. It also reminds us that people are working tirelessly all over this country, investing their time, money and effort, and in the process creating a network of noble minded and reliable citizens. These people make our country more beautiful, and that is why we celebrate your accomplishments, ladies and gentlemen, you who had these ideas, made donations and helped bring this project to fruition. Thank you!

I also consider the Elbphilharmonie building to be well-suited to our open society. Its architecture unites very different elements without compromising their individuality. This is particularly evident in the Plaza, which is a freely accessible public space where people can meet. The same idea is also expressed by this concert hall, in which no one has a back row seat, and which is lined by a white skin composed entirely of uniquely shaped panels. Here, we all sit side by side and feel we are part of a community, without needing to give up our individual identities. This is a place for many individuals to have shared

experiences. In this way all of us – each for him or herself and we as a collective – can feel the connecting power of music.

This building aims to be everyone's Elbphilharmonie – that is a big promise, one that also creates many expectations. It is now up to all of you here in Hamburg to take on this challenge and to bring good ideas to life.

We all know that, traditionally, concert-goers in Germany are mostly well-educated, well-off, more senior members of the population. In short, they represent only a small section of our German society. To diversify the audience, people must be reached who previously did not attend concerts. Also, we must inspire young people to listen to classical music. It is a matter of fairness, because new concert halls are built not only thanks to sponsors and generous patrons, but also with public funding and tax money, and as everyone in here in Hamburg knows, the price tag was hefty. What is more, it is a matter of providing for the future. We are also maintaining the value of classical music by promoting its appreciation among new groups of people and in new parts of society. Let's see if these efforts are successful, dear citizens of Hamburg.

The Elbphilharmonie can now play a role in achieving this goal. Its popularity and attractiveness must be harnessed to increase classical music's appeal. I am aware that, in Hamburg, you realised this some time ago, and I know that you have already achieved a great deal. For instance, you have put together an impressive programme of concerts, and you hold many music appreciation events. Already today, you have managed to breathe new life into and diversify the music scene in your city. I encourage you to keep up the good work! Make the most of the opportunities this building offers. Then, the Elbphilharmonie can become what many people in Hamburg envision: the hallmark of an outward-looking and culturally diverse city, and a jewel in Germany's crown as a country that values culture.

There is one thing we can learn from the history of the Elbphilharmonie's construction: sometimes, it is absolutely necessary to think big and fight to overcome obstacles, so that a good idea can become a reality. Architectural undertakings don't always go according to plan. Visionary projects may take unforeseeable turns. This does not mean, however, that a magnificent outcome justifies ignoring entirely mistakes and shortcomings that were made during the planning and building phase. This we will not do. At least, we want our civil servants to take good note of these mistakes. Particularly those who have the courage to create and blaze new trails must, when tax money is involved, give early thought to how risks can be minimised. Ladies and gentlemen, you know me, and you will be aware that I myself am not averse to taking risks. But I do believe that some risks can be assessed.

However, I will continue on a positive note: Here in Hamburg, you took on a big project. You put in tremendous effort. Your accomplishment is impressive, and all of you can be proud of the outcome. I hope that the Elbphilharmonie will be a place for everyone to congregate, a place that attracts opposites and that creates new experiences. A place where all people can sense the connecting, inspiring and exhilarating power of music that transcends all borders. As we know, sometimes it performs miracles. This startlingly beautiful building brings with it an obligation. It is an obligation that you must live up to – together.