Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at an evening of culture in honour of Paul Celan  
at Schloss Bellevue  
on 2 November 2020

A celebration for Paul Celan – what form should such an event take? Like many others, we, too, wanted to celebrate Paul Celan in this, the hundredth year of his birth. With artists and a wide audience, in a joyful and festive setting. And, like many others, we had to cancel the event planned for April due to COVID-19. Now, the new date has fallen right in the second wave of the pandemic. From today, cultural institutions throughout the country are once again having to find creative solutions to share their music, their performance, their art with the public. And that is getting increasingly difficult. I know that many institutions are not only under extreme pressure, but are fighting for survival. Especially now, when once again we cannot go to the theatre, to concerts or to exhibitions due to the pandemic, we need to think about how we can support artists in other ways. And so must policy-makers. That is one of the reasons why we decided not to postpone this event again, far less to cancel it.

But there is another reason, too. In times like these, we need culture more than ever. To encourage us, to give us strength, to help us reach out to one another emotionally. We need culture as the lifeblood of society as we live through a crisis together. A crisis that is forcing us to be patient for a while, but that will one day be over. Culture needs a firm place in our lives, now more than ever: for it gives us the courage to change, overcomes our current grey reality and gives us an inkling of what is possible.

This evening’s festivities will unfortunately take place without guests, specifically without our guests from France, without Eric Celan, without Bertrand Badiou, and also without Barbara Wiedemann from Tübingen, but will feature a programme adapted to the current circumstances, a purely digital event.
Having said all that, this evening we are celebrating Paul Celan. We want to give him a platform. The invited artists want to and will honour him through their contributions. Opportunities like this have become rare. In November they will be rarer still. And we have to make sure that they do not disappear entirely. That would be a tragedy for us all.

Poetry and music are art forms that depend on performance, that live through interpretation and their interpreters. It is no coincidence that these art forms are as old as our culture. They are essential for all of us for our survival. I therefore want to welcome all guests in the livestream all the more warmly, wherever they happen to be watching and listening this evening!

During our preparations for this evening, our thoughts focused on the question of how and where, but even more on this question: for whom are we organising this celebration?

Paul Celan – the “greatest French poet in the German language”, as Claude David, the French German scholar, called him; or the exotic German-language poet he remained even in France, as Durs Grünbein says; or the marvellous translator of Russian and French poetry in particular; or the displaced person, the universal migrant, the poet who is always a Jew, as Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva described him?

What has emerged is a programme which speaks less about Celan and more especially for him. I hope this will honour the poet who taught us to feel, in an age without feeling. Whose voice and whose silence remind us that language is a living being, not a soulless stream of words, that it does not merely name, but creates a tie to its subject and to us who speak it.

For this poet, Paul Celan, is not merely one of the greatest poets in the German language; he is, literally, significant. He demands to be interpreted. Indeed, the more we understand what he is telling us about ourselves, the more significant he becomes.

This understanding has, I believe, grown with the passage of these last fifty years. Every one of Paul Celan’s poems is, as his Russian companion and fellow poet Osip Mandelstam says, a message in a bottle directed to a far-off, unknown addressee whose existence the poet could not doubt without also having to doubt his own. This distant stranger need not be a contemporary, indeed, he is generally likely to be a future acquaintance.

The publication of half a dozen books on a poet’s life and works to mark his hundredth birthday is perhaps not unusual. What is unusual is the phenomenon that is Paul Celan, to which the authors constantly seek new answers. Helmut Böttiger and Marcel Beyer will be discussing their interpretations later. Maria Stepanova will deliver a keynote from Moscow. Jens Harzer and Marina Galic will read extracts
from the correspondence between Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann. We will be listening to some music and – naturally – some of Celan’s poems. His special relationship with Friedrich Hölderlin and Nelly Sachs will be touched on.

If a German President hosts an evening in honour of Paul Celan, then he ought to be able to say something about the relationship between the country for which he speaks and the poet Paul Celan. And he ought not to shy away from speaking about the guilt and shame that in truth burdened this relationship.

Today it seems that no-one who has ever read one of Celan’s poems and who knows about his origins and life story could ever be surprised that this poet had a broken relationship with Germany, the country of his mother tongue. Precisely because his mother loved the German culture and German ended up being his mother tongue, and because both meant everything to him and had been the foundation for his career as a poet, the loss of his mother was a lifelong sorrow. He could never overcome the fact that she was killed at German hands by a shot to the back of the neck. His mother tongue had become the language of murderers; the language of “racial jurists”, “people of culture”, even that of the “philosophers”, had become toxic, like Celan’s relationship with Germany: a mismatch.

Between Cernăuți, where he was born, and Paris, where he lived for many years, lay this country, which he visited often, in which he had friends, but which was never a place in which to live and write. Nonetheless, this Germany was his resonance chamber. Here his poems were published, read, discussed, met with incomprehension and bewilderment, but also with great appreciation.

But the bewilderment which Celan met with in his contemporaries, in particular the influential literary critics of the early 1950s, but also the poets and authors of Group 47, who themselves aimed to confront the legacy of the Third Reich, was the cause of further pain.

In many ways, one must regard Celan’s links with Group 47 as tragic. In 1952, Celan read “Death Fugue” at the Group’s meeting in Niendorf on the Baltic coast. It was his debut in this circle, and also a breakthrough. In the ensuing vote for the winner of the Group 47 Literature Prize, which was awarded to Ilse Aichinger, Celan took third place. He received an offer for publication of a volume of poetry, and a broadcasting contract. However, and here is the crux of the matter, this success is overshadowed to this day by the scandal triggered by the reaction of the Group’s founder, Hans Werner Richter. Celan’s mode of delivery had reminded Richter of Joseph Goebbels. The fact that Richter even voiced this infamous comparison in public at lunch after the meeting was undoubtedly more than a misunderstanding, even “of the most embarrassing kind”, as Heinrich Böll put it when
commenting on the fateful incident later. The dislike was mutual. Celan regarded Hans Werner Richter as representing "a realism that is not even of good quality", as he wrote to his wife Gisèle in Paris.

However, the rejection Celan sensed went even deeper. He felt himself rejected by the majority of those present in Niendorf because, as he said, "they do not like poetry". Paul Celan did not return. He refused all further invitations to meetings of Group 47. Perhaps he could no longer see – or no longer wanted to see – that his appearance in Niendorf had ultimately triggered something, perhaps more than he had hoped for: a breakout from the confines of realism to openness, to literary modernism, a means of access for Celan to the resonance chamber that was the Federal Republic of Germany. With Group 47, however, there was no reconciliation.

It seems to me that this was true not only of Celan and German literature in those years. At that time, there was scarcely any form of understanding between the survivors of the Shoah and the representatives of the so-called "Flakhelfer" generation, the boy soldiers called up at the end of the War.

That was one reason why Adorno’s dictum that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” was misunderstood. It was not a doctrine and not a condemnation. No-one was prohibited from expressing horror at the Shoah through language. However, communication across this gulf of experience remained impossible for a very long time.

Furthermore, major critics of the day were apparently determined to deny the Shoah as such simply by ignoring it. Celan’s lyricism, it was claimed, had no basis in experience and therefore no relationship to reality. It was dismissed as “Absolute Poetry”. His wealth of metaphors, it was said, was neither plucked from nor in the service of reality.

This type of criticism not only remained silent itself about the crimes of National Socialism; it also kept silent those who wanted to speak about them, indeed who needed to speak about them.

For remembering the Shoah, and talking about it, was for many survivors an obligation. Those who help people to forget by staying silent, Elie Wiesel says in his plea to the survivors, finish the work of the murderers. Bearing witness was existential; it was at once a burden and a need. Should the fact that there were poets and authors among the survivors of the Shoah have been their misfortune, then that is a shaming indictment of the Federal Republic of the time.

Not until a generation later did the rigidity of those years break down. Marcel Beyer, born in 1965, and Durs Grünbein, born in 1962, are patently among those who received Celan’s message in a bottle. Reading "Death Fugue", the best known of Celan’s poems and the one that delves farthest into the abyss, Grünbein says this: it was about
shame, about great shame. The shame of one who is ashamed that virtually none of his contemporaries was ashamed. Marcel Beyer meets the monster past and present with a “demon removal service”.

Literature, including poetry, found forms in which to recount and speak about and after Auschwitz. Imre Kertész spoke of atonal narration, Paul Celan of a “greyer” language whose musicality was to have nothing to do with melodiousness. Ultimately both expressed Adorno’s view: because horrors lived through could no longer be integrated into a shared world of experience, language also had to resist everything that had existed, everything that had been tried, tested and cultivated in the past.

There was no way back from this experience. Paul Celan was a displaced person through and through, as Durs Grünbein says, a person who was never able to arrive, one who conversed with other exiles, with Ovid, with Dante, with Osip Mandelstam and Marina Tsvetaeva, who never became a Frenchman and who has remained a unique figure in German poetry.

The Cernăuți of Paul Antschel, the Romanian city in which the remaining diehards of the defunct Habsburg Empire conversed with each other in countless languages, the city in which his first poems had been passed among his friends, no longer existed. A human lifetime later, a great poet leapt into the Seine in Paris. He drowned in the river during the transportation, wrote Ingeborg Bachmann, who understood him.

The German-speaking Jew was forced out of a city and a culture that was so polyglot that one cannot but call Paul Celan a poet of Europe.

Paul Celan is being celebrated, not only here in Berlin today, but also a few days ago in Mannheim and elsewhere in Germany; he is being celebrated throughout Europe, including in his beloved “Half-Asia”, from which he was expelled, in Cernăuți, where a literary festival recalling him has taken place every autumn for years. And had plans not been thwarted by the pandemic, he would have been celebrated there, in this, the hundredth year of his birth, in events perhaps as polyphonic and polyglot as was the Cernăuți of Paul Antschel’s day.

Dear Eric Celan, your trip with Bertrand Badiou had long been planned. Then we had to accept the situation and exercise caution. I know, however, that you are not merely watching tonight in Paris, but in your heart are here with us in Bellevue. And I can assure you that we are with you in Paris.

Barbara Wiedemann, Bertrand Badiou, we – and indeed this entire evening – owe much to you and your work. My sincere thanks go to you too.
Ladies and gentlemen, many thanks to all of you for being here or listening to us this evening. May we all enjoy a lovely and inspiring evening.