Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
in a video message at a gala concert to mark the 250th anniversary of Ludwig van Beethoven’s baptism in Bonn
on 17 December 2020

The Federal President’s speech was recorded in advance and sent as a video message.

Beethoven is great. I encounter him almost every day; it is very hard to miss him, and I mean that literally as he stands outside my office. Beethoven is greater than any palace, even if, standing outside my door, he is only 99 cm tall, as you can see. Painted gold, “weatherproof and easily transportable” reads the description of the project UNSER LUDWIG, whose statues were to be seen at the Münsterplatz in the Beethoven city of Bonn and which rightly received a warm reception.

So Beethoven now stands here in all his glory at Schloss Bellevue, where we opened this anniversary year with a promenade concert precisely 12 months ago. The pandemic has changed many things since then. Times are hard, especially for culture, for our culture professionals, for all musicians and those working in concert halls and opera houses. The Beethoven year has also had to go into extra time as many of the scheduled events were either cancelled or postponed. Such restrictions affect us all as culture is the very food of life. Today’s concert is likewise taking place in an empty opera house – albeit with a much bigger audience throughout the country, around the world, at home on people’s screens or on the radio. I’m most delighted that this is the case, and I would like to extend a very warm welcome to all members of the audience!

Beethoven is great. You know this, and I know this, and Beethoven’s contemporaries knew this. “I have never heard”, wrote Johann Wolfgang von Goethe from Karlsbad, “one of your works, when performed by skilful artists and music lovers, without wishing that I
could once admire you yourself sitting at the piano, and delight in your extraordinary talent”. Whether in Vienna or Berlin, Paris or London, Beethoven was “in”. He is, to this day, the most-performed composer in the world.

Ludwig van Beethoven, the “extraordinary talent”, lived through exceptional times. Born when the old empire still existed, when Georgia still belonged to George III and a “Sun King” reigned in Versailles, he grew up with the ideals of human rights and the French Revolution, with news of the birth of the United States; he lost his hearing in the Europe of the Napoleonic and Coalition wars, in the years of the Vienna Congress and Restoration; and he died in an entirely different, increasingly bourgeois and industrial world, two years after the opening of the first public railway, at the age of 56.

Beethoven was full of apparent contradictions. He rebelled against social conventions, but was also deft in getting along with the world of the aristocracy. He was already a star in his own lifetime, celebrated in the courts of Europe, and yet he often lived an unhappy and reclusive life, was lonely and, in the end, increasingly down at heel. “My heart is full of so many things to say to you […]. There are moments when I feel that speech amounts to nothing at all”, he writes in Teplitz to his “immortal beloved”, and you can hear the exasperation of a man whose true language is music.

Or, as Goethe wrote after their sole encounter, which lasted just a few days: “I have never seen an artist more collected, energetic and heartfelt” […] “his natural temperament is wholly uncontrolled”. While the pair did not become friends as their characters were too different, the poet believed that he understood the composer: “I understand quite well how he must be peculiar against the world,” writes Goethe.

Beethoven is pure emotion. This is why his music is understood the world over, from Tokyo to Vancouver, from São Paolo to Singapore. Sorrow and anger, love and exuberance, friendship and joy – these are feelings that we all share, which make us brothers and sisters. This language is understood by everyone. Billions of people are familiar with his works. Even those who grew up without a piano in their living room, who never had music lessons, are familiar with Beethoven – even if they only know his greatest hits, such as the beginning of the Fifth Symphony, the Ode to Joy, the Moonlight Sonata, perhaps even just as ring tones or as film music. Only very few composers of his age managed to achieve that.

Deutschlandfunk launched a wonderful campaign in this anniversary year with its “letters to Beethoven”. For instance, the Taiwanese-German pianist Pi-hsien Chen wrote the following to her Beethoven: “You were unable to receive a worldly happy end during your […] own lifetime. And yet your wish was always there: for the
whole of humanity! [...] Now you have millions of distant beloveds.”
“Everyone uses your music to call for hope, peace and justice."

That hits the nail on the head. He was baptised, and had presumably been born just a few days previously, 250 years ago today. Beethoven inspires us, far beyond the present hour, day or year – and he inspires us for the great adventure of being humans together in this world. We are grateful to him for this to this day.

I wish us all a wonderful concert and would like now to give the floor to maestro Daniel Barenboim in Bonn.