MEETING THE AUTHOR OF *MAESTRO*

I interview Peter Goldsworthy in the first floor lounge of the Quay West Apartments. A quiet spot, I've been promised, but it isn't. As we sit down, uncannily, the piped music that swims amidst the sound of vacuum cleaners is a version of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, sung unctuously and with almost ludicrous sincerity. I say 'uncannily' because the subject of our conversation is Peter's gracefully profound novel *Maestro,* and this is the sort of music, exactly, that would have been playing in the hospital for the dying maestro, Eduard Keller. 'Sister', says Paul Crabbe, the maestro's loved student, urgently. 'Could we turn that off. *Please.*'

Maestro is a novel I have read several times, always with pleasure. What do you say on first meeting an admired writer? I tell him that an episode in the novel that has always delighted me particularly is the dinner party given for the Austrian maestro by Paul's parents, who are grateful for the excellent results of Paul's piano exams. Eduard Keller is not the ideal dinner guest. He punctures every conversational balloon with courteous but absolute precision. Paul is tired of the wall that Keller invariably erects round himself, and hiding behind the convenient mask of youth and innocence he asks about the maestro's missing little finger. Is it this loss that prevents him from playing now in public?

'There are concert pianists with one whole hand missing,' he smiled. 'What is one little finger?'

'I just thought...'

'The ear-finger, we call it at home.'

He jammed the stump into the socket of his ear and agitated furiously.

'This is my problem: I can no longer clean my ear.'

And he laughed for the first time that night—uproariously, harshly.

This is a scene that Peter smiles to recollect, and he tells me that *The Ear Finger* was his first choice for the novel's title.

Maestro deals in a peculiarly graceful way with one of the most extraordinary and disquieting paradoxes of European culture. The composer Michael Tippett, in the essays collected under the title *Moving Into Aquarius,* records how he carried around with him for many years a cutting from an article in the Times Literary Supplement. The author of the article remarked that it would be possible to imagine a concentration camp commandant who had a deep love of the music of Mozart and the poetry of Goethe. This commandant would invite the more educated inmates of the camp to his rooms for evenings of poetry and chamber music. He would bring his children up, lovingly, to a love of Mozart and Goethe as sensitive and courteous as his own. What persistently disturbed Tippett was the possibility of putting together the greatest masters of the European imagination with the greatest horrors that that imagination had produced: Mozart and Belsen, Goethe and Auschwitz...

I have an old recording of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony that is quite uniquely incandescent. Never has the first movement trembled so articulately on the brink of saying the unsayable, never has the scherzo been more jovially demonic, never—absolutely never!—has the Adagio come so close to absolute stillness. And nowhere have I heard more fervent expression of the Ode to Joy—that song of universal brotherhood—than is achieved by these choristers. 'O Ye Millions, I embrace ye!'—they sing—'Here's a joyful kiss for all!' This performance was recorded at a concert in the very heart of the Third Reich, Berlin in 1942. The conductor is Wilhelm Furtwangler.

I have always loved Furtwangler's conducting. He doesn't beat time. There are no crotchets and quavers in a Furtwangler performance. Hell, for Furtwangler, would be a place of metronomes rather than everlasting fire. Furtwangler's *Shepherds' Thanksgiving* at the end of the *Pastoral* Symphony is boundlessly radiant. At *Wotan's Farewell* in Wagner's *Die Walkure* the glowing heart of sadness is almost unbearably moving. Can one listen to such magical artistry and not be transformed, ennobled? Imagining a roll-call of fellow admirers of this extraordinary musician I think of many, both musicians and non-musicians. One at the roll-call who would speak of this magical artistry with particular sincerity and emotion would be Adolf Hitler.

When I think of music in the Third Reich I try to think of the Chaplinesque bureaucratisation. Mendelssohn's incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, obviously could not be permitted because Mendelssohn was Jewish. What to do? The play was eternally popular and Mendelssohn's music eternally perfect. Nevertheless a competition had to be organised to find a suitably Aryan replacement. Hundreds of hopefuls tried to fit their clumsy feet into Mendelssohn's exquisite glass slipper—and failed, of course, spectacularly. The words of Handel's oratorios, similarly, had to be changed to replace Jewish content with noble Aryan content. Bureaucrats worked zealously for ridiculous ends. It's almost comforting to watch the way that their operations systematically reduced themselves to absurdity.

And yet the image of Mozart at Belsen always resurfaces in my mind. The music that was played through the loudspeakers in these unimaginable camps as smoke rose from the crematoria was the music of the highest peaks of the European imagination.

Eduard Keller is a finely bred product of the European imagination. His teacher was Leschetizky, who was a

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student of Liszt, who was a student of Czerny, who was a student of Beethoven. Keller in his exuberant youth was obviously a musician of the Furtwangler type—a passionate virtuoso, a pianist of strength and sonority, a magician who could make a percussion instrument sing. In his old age he is a refugee at the world's oddest end—Darwin in the years before Cyclone Tracy. His student would like to play Rachmaninoff, because Rachmaninoff is so beautiful.

His hackles rose: 'We must be on guard against beauty always. Never trust the beautiful.'

'But beauty is what music is for.'

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'Music is a kind of arithmetic,' he told me.

And again, as I pressed him to allow me to return to my then favourites—to Liszt and Rachmaninoff, to noise and speed and blurred hands and lyric flashiness.

'If you want people to believe your lies,' he grunted, 'set them to music.'

Music, of course, is an ambivalent language. Is it for expressing emotion? Or is it dangerous because it does express emotion? Schubert's song *The Linden Tree*, from the song cycle *The Winter Journey*, is a melody of the most haunting and finely shaped beauty. It invites love, irresistably. The last stanza is an invitation to suicide, yearningly contemplated, exquisitely—almost ecstatically—expressed. If one were to express such an invitation in words of equivalent sensuality (if there could be such words), one's work would be forbidden.

Perhaps the most thorough expression of this difficult aesthetic problem is Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*. Wagner himself said that he had written this work as a monument to the emotion of love. The music is magically and outrageously sensual. Young Paul Crabbe's instincts are certainly right when he wants to play a piano transcription of the *Liebestod* for Rosie! And yet the sensuality that is so overwhelmingly celebrated here is unequivocally the sensuality of death. Paul—a talented but in many ways not a subtle youth—can only relate it to his own youthfully burgeoning and beckoning sexuality—and when it comes to burgeoning and

Peter Goldsworthy, author of *Maestro*