

Interview with Dr. Clemens Hellsberg on Hear the World

Dr. Clemens Hellsberg is president and first violin of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra as well as official Hear the World ambassador. This interview was held at the Literaturhaus in Munich on October 12, 2006, on the occasion of the launch of Hear the World.

Dr. Hellsberg, how did you become acquainted with music?

My father was a music teacher; he would practice every day on his violin and piano, listen to music all the time and possessed a music library from which he would read to us time and time again. We were familiar with the works of the great composers as well as with their biographies. We would sing a lot and it was the most natural thing in the world that my brother and I learned how to play an instrument.

What is, for you personally, the special magic of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra?

The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra strives towards a specific sound that is not only the result of their instruments that are in part only played in Vienna (Vienna oboe, Vienna horn), but also of a special tradition: in some instrument groups, the student-teacher relationship reaches back to the foundation year of the orchestra 1842. Furthermore, the extraordinary legal organization of the orchestra certainly contributes to its success on stage. Being an independent, democratic, self-governing institution, every member is equally responsible for the success of the orchestra.

The Vienna Philharmonics are the only self-governing orchestra. You are not only president but also first violin. What are the benefits for you?

Being an active musician, on stage I am the partner of the conductors and soloists I perform with. This means I have a kind of closeness to the great artists that not even the best director or culture manager could have.

The Vienna Philharmonics are official partners of the Phonak Hear the World initiative.

What does this commitment mean to you?

We are happy to work with a partner that incorporates an extraordinary verve, the highest level of professionalism, as well as a constant search for innovations, the highest technological standards and an exceptional humanitarian commitment.

What are your hopes for the Hear the World initiative?

I hope this humanitarian initiative by Phonak will make as many people as possible aware of their own responsibility for their health and well-being: hearing is an extremely important part of your lives; only if we learn how to value our hearing, we will be able to actively care for its health and to break harmful habits.

What meaning does the topic of hearing have, especially for you as a musician?

Hearing is the basis for every kind of music and therefore of crucial importance for every professional musician – we worry about our hearing just as much as about our fingers, arms, lips and teeth.

What are your personal experiences with hard of hearing musicians?

Fortunately, I haven't had too many experiences with hard of hearing musicians. But the few that I have made were downright tragic – formerly brilliant musicians did not realize **the regression**

of their instrumental achievements, due to their hearing loss.

Beethoven composed masterly works when he was already completely deaf. How is it possible that a person with hearing loss can work as a musician?

It's impossible to comprehend the world of imagination of a genius; but it is his very deafness that gives us an idea of Beethoven's extraordinary intellectual power that he transformed into musical achievement. The ability to precisely imagine music and its impact without the slightest acoustic help is evidence of an incredible abstractive power.

Most people are aware that listening to loud music with headsets or in discos is harmful to the ears. What many people do not know, however, is how loud a classical orchestra can be. How do you deal with this?

The loudest seats of the orchestra are provided with sound insulation. Furthermore, certain members of the orchestra who are exposed to loud sounds more than others use special hearing protection. However, the situation as a whole is rather problematic; on the one hand you need the "direct", unprotected ear to truly experience the music being played, on the other hand, you need to protect and preserve your hearing for as long as possible.

In May 2005, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra was appointed as WHO Goodwill Ambassador. How do you strengthen the general public's awareness of the work of the World Health Organization as well as within the scope of the Hear the World initiative through your performances?

The fact that we are Goodwill Ambassador of the World Health Organization makes many people see this organization in a completely different light. The support through various campaigns and focuses – such as the Hear the World- initiative – reminds people of the options they have to make an active contribution to their health and well-being.

What are the challenges you see for the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra in the future?

Art is a constant quest for the maximum, a dispute with infinity. We are aware that we will never achieve perfection in a world limited in terms of time, space and perception; at the same time, however, we do know that perfection exists – and art gives us an idea of it. It is in this spirit that the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra will continue its work, according to the maxim of its founder, composer Otto Nicolai (1810-1849), whose ideal it was on the occasion of the first concert of the Philharmonics to give "the best in the best way". Furthermore, the Orchestra will continue to place great value on its humanitarian commitment in the future. It is about doing our best to contribute to making this world worth living in – and this is where the intentions of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra meet the intentions of Phonak.