

Tere hommikust, good morning.

Once again it is time for Tallinn Music Week, certainly one of the most exciting musical events in Northern Europe. I have, ever since it was begun by Helen Sildna, considered it one of the most interesting musical events in the region, precisely because it fosters new and innovative thinking. It celebrates diversity in musical tastes and the creativity of artists who want to do something new and something different.

As those of you who have heard me in previous years at TMW know, I have a fondness for rock'n'roll and an equally strong fondness for liberty. For me, the two have always gone hand in hand. Yes, you can in fact have liberty without rock, because already 300 years ago when the Scottish philosopher John Locke laid the groundwork for the relationship between the individual and the state, back then there was no rock'n'roll.

But in the past 60 years it has often been rock'n'roll music that has tested the limits of liberty in societies – even in those societies that consider themselves liberal democracies. In other societies, authoritarian, totalitarian, theocratic or a combination of these, you don't have to be a rocker to be locked up, threatened with prison or even death for saying what you believe. We know this quite well in Estonia, where many people suffered without playing rock but for speaking the truth. But rockers also suffered.

Those of you not from Estonia may find this perhaps odd and difficult to understand, but here, when people wanted to be free, they came together and sang. They sang rock, they sang folk, they sang classical, sometimes they sang religious music. And, hard as it may have been to believe back then, it started to work.

It worked so well that today all this singing is called the "singing revolution", because, after all, the basis of our protest was music. But that misses the point actually, because it's free expression, in our case music, that allowed people to overcome their fear, their fear of repression, the consequences of singing, or speaking, their mind. Music, like other forms of art, does that.

This is why the arts are often the first to suffer, and also the most vulnerable to repression, because behind any act of real art (and I am not talking about state-sponsored, state-initiated so called art of which we have all kinds of examples left over from the Soviet Union here, but real art), any act of real art is a denial of the status quo. It threatens the status quo. Because otherwise it'd be just the same boring stuff, but art is art when it does something differently, creates something new, and that always, a priori, by definition, will threaten the status quo

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When Estonia's greatest living composer, Arvo Pärt, wrote his genre-changing music here in Estonia in the 1970s under Soviet occupation, it was too different, too out of the mainstream, it was considered too subversive that he had to be silenced. He was no longer allowed to earn a living here and he was forced to emigrate. And of course, once he moved to the West and could live in freedom, both spiritual and artistic, he became a legend and has been changing the face of serious music ever since. Nor has he given up his conscience, having dedicated his fourth symphony to Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

With Rock n Roll it is more difficult, as Rock has always challenged the more fundamental beliefs of society. When Beethoven brought dissonance and synchopation into his second symphony, also known as Eroica, it did upset listeners in a concert hall in Vienna but the burghers and Austria didn't even know much about it.

Rock n roll, with its huge audience and its in-your-face attitude managed to offend right from the beginning with Elvis Presley's hip-pumping censored on television. When a little more than a mere ten years later John Lennon said the Beatles were more popular than Jesus Christ, rallies were held to burn the Fab Four's records. Which showed that when you offend popular sensibilities, people are ready for almost anything, including burning records – which, I guess, some thought was different from burning books.

That is the role played by rock'n'roll. To offend sensibilities enough to cause people for societal attitudes, for government behaviour to change. We laugh today at the censorship imposed on Elvis Presely, we laugh that John Lennon could have produced such an outcry. Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols today does nostalgia tours for people of my generation – I am sixty.

Sensibilities change, which means that we change.

Yet this holds true when we are dealing with societies that value the individual and his or her right to free expression. Where today we see more and more of a clash is where different concepts of the rights of the individual come into conflict. Where societies wish to impose their own, often collectivist concept of rights on other societies, on other people. I think the first example of this in modern times was the Fatwa pronounced against Salman Rushdie, who some 30 years ago playfully retold the legends of his own religion in a novel, in an artistic and unorthodox way. But some self-appointed arbiters said they were offended and decided he had to be killed, even though he was living far away in a free liberal democratic society that was based on freedom of expression.

Fearful, his own government – that is to say, Salman Rushdie's own government as a British subject – tried to distance itself from him. Since that time we have seen a number of cases where people who say things, make films or draw cartoons or write books that offend some collectivist sensibility, have been killed or marked for death because they say things that supposedly offend one or another group.

This strikes at the core of the ideas of the Western Enlightenment. The same Enlightenment whose science and art has enabled us to transcend pre-industrial primitiveness, that allows us to produce amplifiers and microphones and records and CDs, videos and Youtube, all of which underly rock'n'roll. Others can copy those things but they cannot create. They can only be created in a tradition that values the role of the individual. Because in order to create, you need to innovate, do things differently from the group, differently from the collective.

Before the Enlightenment we believed that the Sun circled the Earth and people who said otherwise were tortured or burned at the stake. Before the Enlightenment people who were different were accused of being different, to the wild approval of the collective, and they were burned at the stake. Before the Enlightenment, group think outweighed the ideas of the lone individual.

This is the ultimate tragedy of authoritarian societies. You kill creativity, you kill the spark of life and culture, of science. You kill your scientists, you kill your artists. And in doing so you kill your society. And also the chance to change.

Pardon me for being so serious when I myself keep hearing in the back of my skull Mick Jagger

singing a song from 40 years ago, from when I was in my third year of college, "It's only rock n roll, but I like it".

But it isn't only rock n roll. It is also Arthur Rimbaud and Ezra Pound, it's Arnold Schoenberg and Vladimir Mayakovsky, it's Lou Reed and Salman Rushdie and Robert Mapplethorpe.

When collective belief systems, be they Marxism-Leninism, Fascism, or one or another religion that thinks it has the unique key to truth, have more of a say than the lone individual, the result is tragedy and the end of any hope for democracy, for freedom or for any real art of any type.

So I wish TMW success. I am proud of this event, which has gotten me in so much trouble for standing up for freedom, more in fact than any other thing I have actually done, which of course is a tiny piddly drop compared to the ocean of suffering endured by those I have stood up for throughout my life. And who, whatever their art form, whatever their form of expression have my undying and eternal respect.

I speak about these perhaps too abstract notions, because freedom is not an abstraction. It is the basis of our lives.

Thank you very much.