

Speech at ORF musikprotokoll

Awarding of the Honorary Doctorate by the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz

Dear Rector, dear colleagues, dear friends,

Three years ago, my flute was on stage here in Graz. I myself was in prison, cut off from the outside world. No one knew whether I would ever stand on a stage again.

And today, I am here with you. And not just with one flute — I have several again now!

You can hardly imagine how incredible all of this feels to me.

As recently as a year ago, I wasn't sure whether I would ever be able to play the flute again after everything that had happened. And today, not only am I playing again, but I am also part of a world premiere, together with my friend, wonderful musicians, and all of you — our magnificent audience.

I can hardly believe that all of this is happening right now. I feel as though, after many years of isolation, I have returned to life. To my wonderful world of music, friendship, rehearsals, concerts, and creating art together. To a world that I had always taken for granted, but that had suddenly become unreachable.

In prison, music was a space of freedom for me. My body was imprisoned, but my mind remained free. The music continued to resonate within me, refusing to let my thoughts, my consciousness, and my dreams be imprisoned too — as my body had been.

But today, I would like to speak not only about music, but also about another extraordinary force: human solidarity.

My sister Tatsiana spent all those years doing everything she could to make sure my voice was heard. She knocked on countless doors and reached out to politicians and international organisations, but far too often, people simply did not want to listen to her. They ignored her. She was my voice when I could not speak for myself. I know how much courage, strength, and love that took, and I am endlessly grateful to her.

But do you know what moved me most after my release? Learning just how much people from the worlds of art and music had done. You did not wait for someone to come to you and ask for help.

You decided to act yourselves.

You organised concerts, created music, and supported me and other political prisoners. You awarded me an honorary doctorate when I could not even know about it. And you brought my flute onto this stage when I could not be here myself.

I find it difficult to put into words how much this means to me.

I believe that, as artists, we often underestimate our own power. Sometimes we think that the important decisions are made only in political offices and that art can change very little. But what has happened here proves the opposite.

Our strength lies not only in what we create, but also in our ability to think independently, make our own decisions, and take action.

We do not have to wait for permission to support another person or to act according to our conscience. And that is precisely why authoritarian regimes are so afraid of free artists, musicians, and writers. Because independent thinking leads to independent action. And a free person is much harder to subjugate.

The solidarity you have shown has overcome distances, time, and prison walls. And today, I stand here as living proof of just how powerful that solidarity can be.

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz, its Rectorate and Senate, to ORF musikprotokoll, to Rainer Elstner and Sergej Newski, to all the musicians, all the organisers, and every single person who has supported me over these years. And a very special thank-you to Viktoriia and to the composer of "Radiophobia", for making it possible for us to create and perform new music together today.

I accept this honorary doctorate not only with profound gratitude, but also with a deep sense of responsibility — to continue making music, to support others, and never to forget those who are still not free.

For me, this is not simply a return to my former life.

It is a return to a future that, until very recently, seemed impossible.

And I owe that to you, too.

Thank you very much!

Graz, 9.10.2026 - Maria Kalesnikava