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Anton Kuerti: Mordechai Vanunu's position is not against Israel but against nuclear weapons whose very possession is, itself, an act of terror.

Whistling in the dark?

Israel's most celebrated 'traitor' has much to teach us, says pianist **ANTON KUERTI**

*I have heard the voice of my conscience.
And there's nowhere to run...
Stop the train.
Get off the train.
The next stop is nuclear holocaust.*

Those words are from a poem by Mordechai Vanunu, the Israeli nuclear technician whose conscience, deeply tormented by Israel's development of nuclear weapons, pushed him to blow the whistle and tell the world.

As a result of his 1986 revelations to Britain's Sunday Times, Israel's covert spy and commando agency, Mossad, arranged for a voluptuous young agent to approach Mr. Vanunu in London and lure him to Italy, where he was drugged, kidnapped and transported to Israel. There, at a secret trial, he was sentenced to 18 years in prison, the first 12 of which were spent in solitary confinement.

There is a striking parallel in the music world: Florestan, the hero of Beethoven's opera, *Fidelio*, is also confined in solitude to a dungeon where no ray of light penetrates, nor any glimmer of hope that justice might eventually prevail. He sings: "In the springtime of my life, my happiness has fled. I bravely ventured to tell the truth, and these chains are my reward... my heart's sweet solace is that I have done my duty."

Compare this to Mr. Vanunu's aria: "I did what I did from a deep internal conviction and I would do it all again. ... I acted out of concern for this society even though Israel likes to portray me as public enemy number one. ... The most difficult thing was not being able to talk to anyone, I could talk only to the walls and I longed for human contact."

Mordechai Vanunu is now in his 15th year of incarceration — what a distressing

example of life imitating art.

Having previously compared these two prisoners in some public speeches, I sent Mr. Vanunu the text of one, together with a couple of my CDs. Recently, to my astonishment, I received a handwritten, touching response from Ashkelon Prison.

Dear Mr. Anton Kuerti:

Thank you very much for your letter and 2 CDs — good and wonderful to hear from you, and enjoyed very much to hear you performing Beethoven. I like your piano play, and I have heard a lot of classical music, especially opera here in prison, especially *Fidelio* and, of course, it was like Beethoven wrote it especially for my case, but I am here 15 years waiting for that great wonderful, heavenly Finale, still to come. So I heard it many times, and felt like it is happening already. By overcoming all the harassment and torture... during very long time in isolation and psychological war, so Beethoven without the Finale helped me here to stand firm and strong.

Yes classical music is a very wonderful instrument I used in this total isolation and Beethoven really gives good music to describe this dark life in prison and the Israeli savage war to try to kill me in prison, but no one entered this prison to save me, only Beethoven himself with his music. ... You [mentioned in your speech how the warden would say to me that the prisoner] in this cell before you committed suicide, so each time I heard this message my immediate answer is Beethoven with very loud strong music into my ears, my head, that

was the guarantee here is another very different prisoner.

The 'son of Beethoven' is here, will never give up, and even when I fight back for surviving I should do it very good because my enemies are very sophisticated with all the modern science fighting me.

Well it is wonderful to know that you [are] supporting me long time ago and spoke on my case, demanding my release, [and] agree with my act against nuclear weapons and my belief we are winning this war and nuclear weapons going to be destroyed [and] abolished, and know very well you, the musicians, have much more power influence on world politics by your music, and if more musicians will take such very strong clear stand against nuclear weapons they will succeed in this mission.

My act was for this target, to inspire you and many others in many fields, to use your society status for ending nuclear weapons.

Yours sincerely,
Mordechai Vanunu

Integrity sometimes requires betrayal on one level to avoid a more profound betrayal. A recent example was Vermont Senator James Jeffords, who betrayed his party in order not to violate his conscience on environmental, economic, social and military matters that may decide the future of this planet. In Toronto, researcher Nancy Olivieri was an inspiring example, when she chose fidelity to the Hippocratic oath over loyalty to her employer and the drug company financing her work.

Mr. Vanunu, with no reward beyond the unburdening of his own conscience, and without revealing any information that could help others in their weapons development, betrayed his country's secret in order to help prevent the crowning catastrophe of human history.

Israel's Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres, has said: "We will not introduce nuclear weapons into the region; certainly we will not be the first to do so." But his country's nuclear policies were never debated by the Knesset, and its armed forces have created a considerable stockpile of the evil devices.

It should be clear that Mr. Vanunu's (and my) position is not against Israel but against nuclear weapons whose very possession is, itself, an act of terror that dwarfs even the despicable events of Sept. 11. No matter who creates, deploys or ignites them, they represent an intolerable threat to humanity that trivializes any evil they are meant to guard against.

Indeed, the only hope for Israel's long-term survival is to negotiate the total removal of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons from the entire Mideast, for no country is as vulnerable as the tiny Jewish state.

Brandishing this mother of all big sticks not only entices others to create even bigger ones, but the gruesome Chimera of security it provides is also bound to increase the recklessness of one's own political and military adventures.

Mr. Vanunu's conviction that nuclear weapons will eventually be eliminated — and that we musicians can play an important role in this crusade — reveals the extraordinary fervour of his dedication. Lamentably, however, this will surely prove to be wishful thinking. Just as in Greek tragedy, ineluctable fate plows on, disdaining even the most heroic human efforts to alter it.

Still, one must never stop hoping that Agamemnon will not really slay his daughter Iphigenia. It may be fruitless, but we can do no less than emulate Clytemnestra who, until the very last instant, implores her husband not to commit that irrevocable, abominable deed.

Pianist and composer Anton Kuerti is internationally renowned for his interpretations of Beethoven.