

Position statement from 1 November 2024

The debate surrounding *Diversity of Voices II* and “Sonderzug nach Pankow”

The Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss is currently facing criticism in a few newspaper articles and on social media for the choir project *Diversity of Voices II*. Since late September, eight choirs have been rehearsing for the second edition of our *Diversity of Voices* event. This year’s choir performances form part of the discussion relating to our annual focus *Blown Away: The Palace of the Republic*.

One of the planned events is Udo Lindenberg’s song “Sonderzug nach Pankow” (Special Train to Pankow), which will be performed by all the choirs singing together in the foyer. This song is highly significant in terms of its relationship to the history of Germany’s division and, in particular, its connection to the Palace of the Republic. The song enjoys cult status, and, for good reason, it is still considered a classic. Hence the joint choral performance in the foyer.

During rehearsals, some of the singers asked how they should handle the original line from the song “Ich muss da was klärn mit eurem Oberindianer” (I have to clear something up with your chief Indian). Some of the participants found this phrasing inappropriate from a modern-day perspective. What followed was an in many ways constructive and respectful discussion among the choirs, the external artistic directors, and the event planners at the Stiftung Humboldt Forum. As a result of these discussions, we decided that the word “Oberin—” – the word referring to Indigenous peoples – would not be sung in its existing form.

Even though this word in “Sonderzug nach Pankow” was clearly used metaphorically when it was written in 1983 – and at the time was meant as a satirical and critical reference to Erich Honecker – we are well aware of the fact that echoes of the violent history of the colonization of Indigenous peoples resonate within it. Today, many Indigenous peoples, as well as many of our German and international visitors, feel this word is discriminatory and racist. We take this point of view seriously and respect it.

The Humboldt Forum displays collections that originated in different Indigenous communities, and for years we have worked closely together with these communities to determine how they should be presented. Everyone at the Humboldt Forum wishes to deal very sensitively with language and images, not least because of the responsibility

that comes with the history of the site and of the collections. This is why we have taken the choirs' reservations concerning the song line very seriously.

Our decision not to sing this song line affects only this particular event at this venue. We have neither demanded nor recommended that others share this position or tailor their actions to it.

In coming to this decision, we in no way wish to insinuate that Udo Lindenberg intended this line as racist or discriminatory when he wrote it. Such an insinuation would be both absurd and deeply inappropriate. We have the greatest respect for Mr Lindenberg's work and his political activism. We were only interested in honouring the fact that language habits and sensibilities have changed over the past forty years, and we wish to respect these changes.

We understand that our decision has met with significant – and at times heavy – criticism. For many people, the I-word is a part of their life stories, particularly their childhoods, and therefore has positive connotations.

We are also aware that topics such as gender consciousness and the use or avoidance of certain exonyms for – often marginalized – social groups can serve as triggers in our society. Nevertheless, we were surprised by the vehement and sometimes offensive tone of the debates surrounding this issue.

We are in conversation with the people involved – first and foremost the choirs – and are discussing how we can present *Diversity of Voices II* in a manner that everyone feels safe and comfortable with and thus ensure that it will be a positive experience.

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