

Banquet Speech

Georg von Békésy's speech at the Nobel Banquet in Stockholm, December 10, 1961

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is hard to find words that can adequately express my feelings of gratitude for this high honor that has been bestowed upon me. But as I stand here detached from the laboratory and my colleagues, I ask you to remember, besides me, all the acousticians, communication engineers, psychologists, and otologists who thank you at the same time that someone from this very complex team has been honored.

It is easy to explain why I personally feel so greatly honored. I have always enjoyed the honors I have received from relatively small countries and small universities. Maybe it has something to do with the small size of the cochlea, but more probably it is related to the fact that small countries are sometimes extremely efficient and it is hard to compete with them when it comes to the question of quality. Having been educated in Switzerland I have always admired the small watches, and they suggested in my younger years the question, how is it possible to produce something that everybody likes? It was a surprise to me to find out that Sweden produced four items, internationally known and of outstanding quality: (1) an automatic telephone, (2) a wonderful camera, (3) stainless steel surgical instruments, and (4) the contribution of Alfred Nobel.

But aside from these concrete accomplishments, Sweden has attained something much more difficult, namely, the ability to make judgments of the value of scientific achievements over many decades, judgments that are internationally accepted in spite of the different customs, opinions, and interests of the different nations. In the Olympic games, we can measure time differences and distances, but in science an objective judgment is much more difficult to make. How can they do it? I know only one way, the method used by art lovers to differentiate between originals and counterfeits, and that is to compare and compare and compare. Comparing has helped me to distinguish between the outstanding and the less important scientific works. I think the Nobel prize committee probably does more reading and comparing than any other scientific body in the world. I think we are all grateful for this tremendously unselfish work which is hardly visible in the splendor of this festive occasion. Since the Swedish people make their judgments so slowly and carefully, I used to be afraid of their criticism. Later I learned to respect their criticism, though, because they showed me where my work could be improved.

As you may know, the first recipient of the Nobel prize in Otology, [Robert Bárány](#), also came from Hungary. I do not think that this is pure accident. Otology in Hungary had very high standards and there was a genuine interest in it. I have always had the impression that there must have been one outstanding man who set the pattern. For a long time I was not able to find his name in any handbooks, but one day I found out about him. His name was Högyes, and a small side street I used to walk on in Budapest was

named after him. His work concerned eye movements connected with the vestibular organ, and because he was a proud Hungarian, he published only in the Hungarian language. This is rather hard to read, though not quite so difficult as Sanscrit. But even so, the scientific atmosphere he left behind him could be felt indirectly.

Your Majesty, I would like to thank you once more for the honor you have bestowed on the field of my scientific interest. This historical continuity, together with the fact that the ear is a point on which many scientific fields converge, gives me hope that whatever contribution I have been able to make will endure.

Prior to the speech, G. Liljestrand, member of the [Royal Academy of Sciences](#), addressed the laureate: A great physiologist from the 19th century once coined the expression, "The method is everything". This was a conscious exaggeration, but it emphasizes the paramount role of the technical approach. You, Professor von Békésy, have certainly demonstrated how methods from one branch of science, in this case that of engineering, in the right hands can be successfully applied to another field, here to the solution of complicated physiological problems. By your work, you have added clarity and understanding to numerous aspects of the mechanism of hearing. Especially, you have shown how the sound waves are discriminated in the inner ear. We are happy to tell you how much we value your splendid work.

From [Les Prix Nobel en 1961](#), Editor Göran Liljestrand, [Nobel Foundation], Stockholm, 1962

Copyright © The Nobel Foundation 1961