

The Sounds of Silence

Being a good listener at a concert means being a good performer yourself.

By David Masello

AT A NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC CONCERT a few years ago, then music director Kurt Masur leaped to the podium with his trademark energy and raised his baton to signal the start of a notoriously abstruse piece by Alban Berg. The atonal work began so quietly—with the screeching of a single violin seemingly stuck in a minor key—that the audience couldn't be sure the first note had been struck. As a result, the most audible sound in Avery Fisher Hall, heard with the clarity and force of a C-major chord, was coughing. These were not the coughs of colds but, rather, those of unease and impatience. Perhaps, for some people, the sounds they made were a way to articulate displeasure with the piece.

It was easy to read Masur's body language, even with his back to the audience, as he listened to all the variations on the theme of coughing. Suddenly, the maestro threw down his baton and strode off through the stage door. Several minutes of nervous, hushed chatter followed.

Eventually, Masur reappeared. Sans microphone, he addressed the audience and said in his heavy German accent that there is an appropriate time to cough and an inappropriate time. He suggested that we all cough now, get it out of our systems and unwrap our candies so that the orchestra could perform the Berg piece as it was meant to be heard. Some people applauded his admonishment. Others, I suspect, decided at that moment to wait out his tenure before renewing their subscriptions. When the piece—really, one of the dreariest in the classical-music canon—resumed, audience members remained silent and inert in their seats.

I've been a subscriber to the New York Philharmonic for many years, occupying the same seat, and I know most of the quirks of my fellow attendees. There are those who snore midpiece and others who nap silently, their heads lolling,

then snapping to attention, then lolling again like broken Raggedy Ann dolls. There are those who hum (off-key) and help conduct the orchestra from their seats. Others use the musical interludes to scroll through their BlackBerrys, thumbing out messages. I watch people play musical chairs as they move among vacant seats to get closer to the stage. I can often spot those in the audience who are unfamiliar with the customs of classical music and who will likely applaud madly after the first movement (I once heard a conductor remark that he liked it when people clapped before the end of a piece because it indicated that there were new audience members for classical music). Indeed, Tom Sherwood, principal percussionist for the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, says that "our music director, Robert Spano, seems to enjoy that people are so enthusiastic about the music that they clap between movements. He'll turn and subtly acknowledge them."

But Jody Wolfe, a board member of Miami's New World Symphony, calls premature clapping a "first cousin" to coughing and "a jarring, mood-killing, spell-breaking phenomenon." At a concert at which Itzhak Perlman was conducting, Wolfe recalls the audience applauding not only after each movement of Dvořák's *New World Symphony* but also before the very last notes had



ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL WITTE

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sounded. “After the interval, maestro Perlman returned to the podium, then said to the audience that he had just had a quick chat with Mr. Dvořák, who told him that, flattered as he was, he would much prefer it if the audience would wait until the end of the piece. I think that was the most charming strategy ever employed by an artist to help save an audience from itself.”

David Farneth, head of special collections at the Getty Research Institute and a regular attendee of Los Angeles Philharmonic concerts, says: “Our former conductor, Esa-Pekka Salonen, wouldn’t begin until the hall was dead quiet. He’d stop a piece within the first thirty seconds if there was too much noise.”

Every New York Philharmonic concert begins with a public-address announcement asking everyone to turn off cell phones and electronic devices; the message is also beamed onto the stage wall. Upon hearing it, men slip their hands into jackets and women rummage through purses to switch off their devices. Yet there are the concertgoers who take out their BlackBerrys the moment a piece starts, the blue glow of screens playing off the ceiling. And it is not uncommon to hear the crescendoing rings of a phone during an andante movement or the chirps indicating a text message and not notes from an oboe.

A couple of years ago, guest conductor Riccardo Muti, famously imperious, announced to the audience that he was about to present a piece written by Goffredo Petrassi in honor of those killed in wars. Muti instructed the audience not to applaud at the conclusion. But just as the final note had played and its receding tones were wafting into the reaches of the hall, the familiar melody from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony rang out from a

Listen Up

Being a good listener, whether at a classical-music concert, an improv jazz jam or a performance by a singer at a club like Michael Feinstein’s, requires simple actions.

- Pay attention to the performers. Although they may be playing music, there is also theater in the way they move.
- Let the only sounds be the ones *they* make.
- Keep your eyes on the stage and the performers.
- Don’t be the first to applaud or yell bravo (or brava or bravi, as the case may be); you may find yourself the only one doing so, because the piece has not yet ended. Debussy reputedly said, “Music is the silence between the notes.” So let the sound of that last note fade until what you are hearing is silence, a beautiful note in itself.

cell phone. Muti said nothing, concluded his work on the podium and walked off, with the orchestra members following. But the true intended final note—silence—had been missed.

I have found that even when the music you are hearing is not enjoyable, if you sit still long enough, you will enter a kind of trance, which really is a form of meditation. Whether I love a piece of music or not, if I make myself comfortable in my seat without moving, my mind wanders in a free-flowing manner to often pleasing matters I am not able to think about when immersed in work at the office or running errands. I might find myself indulging in thoughts about a new romance or configuring a guest list for a dinner party or playing with images for a poem I hope to complete. There is a term in psychology, *optimal flow*, an unremittingly pleasant and steady state of mind that results from doing something that provides cerebral contentment. This state can last for a while, for the duration of a piece of music or while you are working a crossword puzzle or writing a journal entry. To pay attention to the music being played is to respect not only the performers but also yourself. ❖



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