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Fear And Loathing In The Concert Hall; A Survival Primer

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"If my friends knew the truth, I'd never live it down. Not that they ever attend the symphony- at least the majority attend less frequently than I do. However, I have established a reputation as an art lover, if only by my friend's lax standards, and I fear the day that someone discerns the truth and exposes my hypocrisy. The truth is that, short of a course in "Prose Writers of the Norman Conquest" or a trip to the ophthalmologist, I can't think of anything more boring than a night at the symphony. I realize that for most people this goes without saying, but understand that not only do I attend the symphony several times a year, but I have devoted entire evenings to subscription drives, pleading with strangers for a forty dollar increase in their membership status, eating soggy tuna-fish sandwiches and drinking bad jug wine, while my friends were out rocking and rolling."

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If my friends knew the truth, I'd never live it down. Not that they ever attend the symphony— at least the majority attend less frequently than I do. However, I have established a reputation as an art lover, if only by my friend’s lax standards, and I fear the day that someone discerns the truth and exposes my hypocrisy. The truth is that, short of a course in “Prose Writers of the Norman Conquest” or a trip to the ophthalmologist, I can’t think of anything more boring than a night at the symphony. I realize that for most people this goes without saying, but understand that not only do I attend the symphony several times a year, but I have devoted entire evenings to subscription drives, pleading with strangers for a forty dollar increase in their membership status, eating soggy tuna-fish sandwiches and drinking bad jug wine, while my friends were out rocking and rolling.

I don’t really understand my reasons for devoting time and money to an endeavor that makes me feel like Cyndi Lauper at a Junior League luncheon. Without going into therapy over it, I have formulated some thoughts on the subject:

1) Most of the grown-ups with whom I am associated love classical music. I believe that classical music is an acquired adult taste, like martinis, and that attending the symphony is an adult ritual that will make me a better grown-up, sort of by osmosis.

2) The symphony is an EVENT; events call for dressing up. Rochester offers few excuses for pulling out all the stops— a little black dress, fancy stockings, high heels and pearls. Getting dressed up is the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down.

3) Attending the symphony is like reading the classics, eating your vegetables, exercising, and writing your grandparents. It’s just good for you, that’s all. One night at the symphony makes me feel virtuous, culturally purged of a multitude of sins, such as MTV, General
Hospital, Judith Krantz novels, The Terminator, and an unrelenting passion for trashy rock and roll. An evening of symphonic self-flagellation makes up for a month of wallowing in the top forty.

Since I have mentioned my gnawing fear that someday someone will look me straight in the eye and say, ‘‘I was sitting three rows away from you and you slept through the entire concert. Did you know that you drool in your sleep?’’ you may wonder why I am making a public confession. The fact is, I don’t believe I am alone. I would bet that a good quarter of the people at any given concert are just like me. They search the season’s prospectus till they find a concert featuring composers whose names they recognize, usually the three B’s, Mozart (wasn’t he in Amadeus?), or any composer whose work can be heard in Fantasia. They happily purchase tickets, put on nice clothes and go out to dinner: ‘‘Let’s make an evening of it!’’ They may even experience a quiet exhilaration on entering the concert hall; my favorite part of the symphony is the dissonant warm-up—anticipation hangs in the air like a scent. They sit down, glance at the program, the lights dim, and panic sets in. They think, ‘‘Please God, let it be different this time. Don’t let me nod off. Let me find aesthetic bliss!’’

I have, in fact, spent my last two concert outings watching the people around me, and I have determined that, for whatever reasons, a lot of the people who go to the symphony would rather be somewhere (anywhere) else. For these people, I risk exposure in order to offer the benefit of my experience; I have discovered some foolproof ways of getting through the symphony without tipping your hand or slipping into a coma.

First, a good, glossy program can be a half an hour’s entertainment for the creative mind. I like to read the list of corporate contributors to the philharmonic; I can spend at least fifteen minutes passing judgment on companies from Kodak to Steve’s Sunoco, smugly assessing their contributions in proportion to what I feel they can afford to pay. I’m sure it is none of my business, but I can’t help but
sniff at some of the more paltry efforts. The Strathallan is in the meager $150-249 member bracket, keeping tight-fisted company with E.F. Hutton and Olin Corporation. These big companies are blown out of the water by little Freetime Magazine (Patrons at $250-499) and Freddy’s drugstore (Associates at $500-999). Canandaigua Wine Company donated a whopping $15,000 this year, but they get the wine concession at the Finger Lakes amphitheater, so their generosity is suspect. My theory is that the very practice of printing the names of corporate contributors is a ploy to shame the more miserly members into upping the ante. It is a good ploy, if, as I suspect, there are more like me, savoring the intricate nuances of the program, instead of the Intermezzo.

I also enjoy casing the list of personal contributors; only the true heavy-weights are listed in the program. From my work as an RPO volunteer, I am familiar with the membership scale. The program lists the members of the Golden Baton Circle; they donated the equivalent of my yearly income. For their generosity they get to have dinner with the David Zinmans, attend all sorts of nifty galas and elegant cocktail parties with visiting soloists, and, as we are careful to mention in our telephone solicitations, they receive free tickets to all concerts for the season. Free tickets? For just ten thousand dollars, anyone can get free tickets to the symphony. How too divine, really. According to the program, those who have received free tickets this year include Mr. and Mrs. Colby Chandler, Carolyn Sibley Wolfe, and Mr. and Mrs. R.J. Strasenburgh. These names represent Rochester royalty; I wonder—do they actually attend the symphony, or do they send whipping boys?

As soon as I exhaust the program, I spend a good deal of time considering my surroundings. How do they clean the chandelier? Do they lower it or do workers ascend ladders? Do they polish all the little crystals individually, or do they use some sort of industrial cordless dustbuster? And how much do the musicians get paid? Does the man who pings the little triangle every fifteen minutes make as
much as the man working his tail off on the kettle drum? Why is the woman sitting next to me moving her lips? Does this song have words? Or is she bored like me, and passing the time by memorizing the preamble to the constitution?

Finally, I’ve worked out a way to miss the last fifteen minutes of the concert and get points for being thoughtful and considerate at the same time. During the break before the last movement, whisper that you are willing to get in line at the coat check, so that your group will not have to wait. Sigh regretfully— you are loath to miss a moment of the Liszt, but after all, what can one do? This excuse is infallible, especially since winter is the concert season and the coat check lines are exceptionally slow and tiresome. If you are attending a spring or fall concert and the weather is too warm for coats, offer to go fetch the car and bring it around to the door. Insist that parking lot traffic makes you despondent.

In spite of these tips, my best advice is to wait for the summer season. Atttending the symphony at the Finger Lakes is remarkably painless. Pick a warm summer evening and dress all in white. Pack a lovely picnic with wine, cold chicken, pasta salad and a terrific dessert. Bring a well-worn quilt and somebody special. Stretch out under the stars and give in to the magic— even incorrigibles are lulled into temporary submission. Maybe the need for gauzy cottons and a picnic dinner separates une faux from une vrai, and I have no illusions as to which category I belong in. But on certain summer nights, while sampling a nice Chardonnay and the sweetly moist Canandaigua breeze, I hear a whisper of pure aesthetic beauty, and for an hour or so, maybe I’m as much a music lover as the one for whom props and scenery are irrelevant. Maybe there is hope for me yet.

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