

Art and Fascism

April 2nd, 2022

Tonight's Program:

Overture from "Egmont" in F Minor, Op. 84 – Ludwig van Beethoven (1810)

Oboe Concerto in C Major – attributed to Franz Joseph Haydn (~1790)

Intermission

Symphony No.2 in D Major, Op. 73 – Johannes Brahms (1877)

BEETHOVEN

We had bought the cheapest seats in the house, those up on the balcony. But as we made our way in we were told that there wasn't enough people to fill the theatre, so everyone in attendance could, in essence, choose their seats freely.

This was pleasant happenstance. My first assistant had been late in arriving, while my second assistant had arrived much earlier than necessary, and was visibly annoyed when I arrived (a respectable 10 minutes before the start of the show). I was anxious myself, not wanting to miss the first piece of the program, Beethoven's "Egmont" Op. 84, which is what I was most interested in hearing, Beethoven being my favourite composer.

The first symphony I ever had the privilege of attending was Beethoven's 6th, which I saw at the University of Toronto. I remember falling asleep at one point in the show, or at least into a daze, and awaking a few moments later in tears. The 6th has always filled my imagination with springlike innocence and bunnies hopping about in a fantastic pastoral landscape.

This is to say that Beethoven demands something of the listener; his compositions give life to a narrative that accompanies the music. The sounds of a tragic hero fighting his battles, the ups and downs of close wins and sure defeats against the evils of mankind. Emotional content. I had spent the afternoon listening to Herbert von Karajan's [rendition](#) of the piece, and was properly prepared for it that evening.

But let me set the scene. The conductor's back is to the audience, all the musicians sitting in a semi-circle facing him, us out here in the auditorium bearing witness to their own little cosmoverse up on stage. I was happy to see a bunch of big jungle drums set up in the back corner, lit up by the fire of the candle-coloured lights.

HAYDN

The soloist came out, a tall, thinnish girl with a classical pallor to her. As the rest of the musicians began strumming out the composition she stood there in her silver and rhinestone dress clearing out her instrument and wetting the mouthpiece. When she began blowing on her pipe (or her oboe...I'm no musician myself) her face welled up like a Muppet, giving her a comical appearance that contrasted with the beautiful music that was a product of her breath. An older couple, sitting a row or two ahead of me, dead-centre in the middle of the auditorium, had a tripod set up and their iPhone filming the show. I figured that maybe the soloist was their daughter.

The conductor, a small man with a thick black mop of hair, stood on his little podium in his black suit and frantically mimed the emotion of the song back at the players in a way that predicted the music itself. He gestured about frantically, the creases in the back of his suit jacket pulling tight across his small body, his black mop of hair shaking violently. The suit itself sported Mandarin collars, and that, along with all his strutting and saluting, gave the impression that we were witnessing some sort of authoritarian procession.

I noticed that a number of the musicians on stage were wearing face masks. Of course, neither the soloist, the composer, nor any of the wind instrument players wore masks. There was a big black man in the back row blowing heavily on a trumpet. If he had a transmissible disease then everyone and their mother was getting it.

INTERMISSION

As soon as the piece ended I got up and made for the exit. One thing that experience has taught me is that, when dealing with a crowd, it is best either to be first or wait until the end. Any movement in the middle gets immediately caught up in the slow progressing lines and inevitable waddling. Me and my second assistant went to the service bar and bought ourselves glasses of wine. Then we went out into the grounds of the theatre and smoked some marijuana.

BRAHMS

The yellow shirts were a bit too much to bear and I found it easier to close my eyes. Classical music is great for losing yourself in your thoughts to. Unlike with Beethoven, I didn't see much of a story with Brahms, unless I directed my imagination towards it, other than the story of my own ideas. I let these play out in my head, guided by the flow of the music, crescendoing and crashing alongside the orchestra.

When I finally opened my eyes, at the beginning of the second movement, what struck me above all else was the instruments themselves. What a wonder to see. Ancient technology was used, so far as one can tell, solely to create beauty. The wonder of the violin, a tight little wooden box that vibrates a lovely *hummm* when you press its cords with a ribbon attached to a stick. I found it all to be incredulous. The whole of them moving as one, moving as a wave, turning the pages of their booklets. Sitting up there, on the stage, reading a strange language I couldn't begin to comprehend. This is the history of mankind and her technology.

I particularly liked the third movement of the Brahms piece. It was an allegro movement, energetic and bouncy, that left me feeling uplifted. One of the violinists, an old paunchy man in the front row to the left of the composer, who seemed to be the second-in-command of the orchestra, grew very impassioned at times, desperately shaking his tiny feet to the accompaniment of the song. I felt the violent little passion coming from him, and myself grew impassioned in turn, desperately rocking my head back and forth.

Thundrously, the little sticks with the ribbons shot up and down in unison, as though they were chained to each other like the oars of a slave boat.

Brahm's Symphony No.2 ended with another allegro movement, the start of which reminded me of the Winnie the Pooh [level](#) in the PlayStation 2 video game *Kingdom Hearts*. And there was something almost farcical about the way it closed; a sort of gaudy over-done triumphant blast, slyly self-conscious of its own showy grandeur, like a little inside joke.

Everyone gave a wondrous applause, the conductor was given a bouquet of flowers by an attendant, and several members of the audience stood for a standing ovation (when my second assistant asked if we were going to stand as well, I told him squarely not – standing ovations are not to be handed out lightly.)

Afterwards we spoke of our favourite composers. We spoke of Wagner, and his epic dramas, and the proposition that he was anti-semitic. Perhaps there is an element of fascism in the classical music scene, a thinly veiled element running through its history like streaks of gold and silver ore. The conductor; the head. The concertmaster; his executioner. All the players moving in perfect unison, like Nazi soldiers in formation.

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