

Evanston Hillbillies

The other week, on a cold, damp November Sunday night, I reluctantly went to a concert in Evanston. The Chicago Chamber Musicians scheduled an evening at Pick-Staiger Hall, the Northwestern concert facility, and offered a Beethoven quartet, an arrangement of Strauss' Til Eulenspiegel for four instruments, the Schubert Fantasia and a modern composition by Dana Wilson. The composer was in attendance that night and introduced the piece.

Classic pieces, mostly, and the musicians handled them well,. The Beethoven was the first of the three Razumovsky quartets, his Opus 59, number 1. These three quartets (numbers one through three) are core elements of his middle chamber period, and Jasmine Lin, the young first violin, was excellent. The older Joseph Genualdi, who took second violin, was no more than effective with the Schubert. The Strauss was entirely superfluous, but the Wilson was intermittently interesting, and the piano writing was arresting, easily claiming our attention

So why do I cavil? And why was I a reluctant attendee? I, who have been attending classical concerts for 30 years? With hundreds of classical discs running from Bach to Shostakovich?

Because classical audiences have become all-but-intolerable. They cannot sit still, they do not listen attentively, and distract one painfully from what is happening on-stage. I have, in effect, stopped going to concerts, and the few I have attended this past year have come only at the request of a close friend with an extra ticket. Not all of these

experiences were bad. A Beethoven Nine was listened to respectfully in Orchestra Hall. Verdi's Requiem produced the respectful quiet one used to take for granted. No longer.

One had expected otherwise, on entering Pick-Staiger. My first reaction was to the age of the audience. Everyone familiar with the diminishing world of classical music knows it attracts fewer and fewer younger people. But even by the grey-haired expectations of the day, the group milling about the lobby of the facility was a surprise; my friend estimated that 90% of the people there were over 60. But my hope for greater attentiveness from older people proved unjustified. Sitting in a balcony seat by my friend, an elderly woman two seats away began audibly fooling around with her purse in order to extract a lozenger. When my friend quietly complained, the woman looked away skeptically as if a request for quiet were absurd. A woman seated immediately behind us, late middle-age I would guess, began drawing her coat over herself as if it were a blanket. You can imagine the noise. When I turned to look at this elderly, eye-glassed bird, the pronounced facial reaction was. "What are you looking at?"

At least, I thought, she didn't say anything aggressive. That's always a possibility in a Chicago-area venue. And the offensive rustling did at least stop.

Then there is the comedy and boorishness. I had a fine view of the first. Another elderly woman began to cough wildly about eight rows below me, and she did her level best to stifle the noise. An eager and solicitous young man took note and pulled what I assume was a lozenger out of his pocket. He passed this down to the person sitting to his right, who understood it was to be passed down to the distressed cougher. But by the time the lozenger reached its sixth or seventh hand, the purpose was sadly lost, and I observed people staring at the wrapped object in confusion, as if it had dropped from the ceiling.

Back it went to the original source, hand by hand by hand; at which time the young man, who had been following the progress of his endeavor, tried to indicate the elderly woman for whom the pill was intended. He began pointing towards her with his right index finger, aiming in a diagonal direction because she was inconveniently seated one row in front of his.

At that point I lost interest in the matter and returned my gaze to the stage.

Boorishness? Perhaps I should not complain. At least the middle-aged couple to my left were silent. But I cling to standards of decorum, and when I saw this late-fifties, grey-haired gentleman comfortably resting his shoe on the back of the red, cushioned chair in front of his, quite as though it was a footrest, I took offense. His wife, or a woman whom I took to be his wife, was not to be outdone—she removed her shoes and crossed her stockinged feet at the ankles over the chair before her. I might have said something, and my companion later told me that I should have. But when we all took our balcony seats before the concert began, I was able, anyone would have been able, to take the man in quickly. His was a dry, self-satisfied face, incipiently contemptuous, not readily susceptible to correction. Say something? What would have been the point?

“There was a time,” another friend commented to me later, “that people would have been embarrassed to be seen doing something like that. They're stereotypical hillbillies.”

“The Evanston Hillbillies,” I replied, thinking: Buddy Ebsen, your money-intoxicated heirs are alive and well. After a good stretch at the concert hall, out they'll go, huntin' and fishin', and God knows, should I say something about concert manners, I could become a target myself.

What was my final thought, driving home in a cold drizzle? I remembered a concert given at Orchestra Hall many years ago by the great Alfred Brendel, who did the unheard-of by breaking off in the middle of a sonata to say to the inattentive rabble, “Ladies, and gentlemen, your silence is part of my performance.” And my second thought: With luck, I’ll be able to dodge these chamber invitations.

© David Cohen March 2008