



Passing Reflections on the Symphony Orchestra

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Music can be vivid *and* abstract at the same time, particularly when it does not correspond to immediate emotive expectation in the listener; particularly when it draws the listener into its sensuous and affective realm and register of tonal evocations instead of intruding into the listener's personal and contingent affective frame. Such music is able to expand the listener's horizon of relatable sounds. This is where instrumental classical music and wordless vocal music proffer endless opportunities for semantic and semiotic discoveries either specific to the sign system of music or generally bearing upon the powerful but often liminally synaesthetic ways in

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which our minds translate one kind of sign pattern into another – words to notes, notes to colours, words to lines, and any of these into dance movements and all vice versa.

What is so riveting about a symphony orchestral performance, experienced live or through a live recording digitally accessed afterwards, is the combination of immediacy and meticulously prepared organization that it evidences. No wonder the term 'orchestration' has acquired meta-musical connotations. Here are a range of string, percussion and wind instruments – the number and character of each kind stipulated by composer and hence not admitting of modification without sound justification backed by the proven credentials and authoritative standing of the conductor. This exactitude in selection (visibly fixed by the multiple copies of the music 'book' or text placed in front of everyone who needs it, even the conductor) invites comparison with the Continental recipe book, where the same principle of judicious inclusion and exclusion is shared with the culinary aspirant. For each ingredient to be able to deliver the exact same quality and distinctiveness of flavour, it is supposed to have been quantified and evaluated and documented beforehand by the discerning practitioner turned theoretician. Besides, there is in both cases the necessary intervention of a range of technologies. Continental cuisine demands precision in baking or cooking time, in temperature regulation and a studied variety of cutting instruments and utensils, not to speak of the elaborate grammar of table manners with respect to the techniques of ingestion.

The selection of instruments then is made in deference to the paramount objective of forging a complex, harmonic sound structure that has no easy build-up nor apparent uniformity of tempo, rhythm, route or tone. Hence there is the need for meticulous planning and preparation in the interest of perfect and reproducible coordination. Very little may be left to chance except perhaps what the temperately inspired touch can provide by way of clinching the flitting magic of the actual performance in real time. Thus this perfection is attained, or at least striven after, through

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intensive rehearsing and on the spot conductorial control. Every entry and departure, every pause and resumption is measured and anticipated. Say where the flautist is to come in, where the second flautist is to join in, then the clarinet, then the trumpet, etc are all meticulously timed. The mainstay of a virtuoso performance is perfect cooperation under magisterially expert guardianship. There is a rise and fall, a modulation of volume, tempo and tone that cannot falter or change or be improvised at random, at least not without the tacit consent of the conductor and musician colleagues. Even the sign system upon which the communication between the conductor and the players is founded is pre-coded in such a way as to preclude misprision or ambiguity in respect of conductorial gesturing.

This pre-orchestration has the makings of a veritable Kantian civil society (as discussed in the seminal essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’) in microcosm, in which every instrumentalist is mindfully selfless enough to give their best, however infinitesimally small the part they play in recreating the composer's intended magic maybe. Even if the wind instruments' contribution lasts, say, all of thirty seconds, the division of labour within those thirty seconds ought to be reproduced with painstaking, committed seriousness each and every time. So everything hangs upon a fine, tenuous, if not perilous balance of rehearsals, individual virtuosity, commitment and collective interpersonal rapport seasoned and optimised through rehearsals. The single expectation from all the performers is one of supreme professionalism. They are to emote, singly and through complex layers of sensorily mediated interpersonal empathies, only so much as to convey in right measure the beauty of the performed piece in form and content. In deference to the abstraction of *Lieder ohne Wörter* (songs without words or *chanson sans parole* – incidentally the name of compositions of Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky respectively), as it were, they would not let the performance become plainly explanatory. They would need to keep the mystique intact even as they went about unravelling the intentions of the composer. The

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expectation is also that they do not let their own emotions around that piece of music or any other competing or contrary emotional pull or preoccupation carry them away so far as to cause significant departures in and disruptions to form and content. Their restrained immersion, monitored and moderated by the paternalistic conductor's watchful eye and discerning ear, in turn helps the audience experience and express their restrained wonderment through the magic of the music. Everything here is predicated upon *civitas*.

One cannot help assume greater scope for improvisations in the case of a theatrical production, by contrast, even with the director watching from the wings. Here, in an orchestral performance, the polyphonic dialogue is ostensibly between the conductor and members of his philharmonic society of instrumental and sometimes choral artists assembled on stage and positioned exactly so as to be able to produce the desired volume and quality of sound patterned by the powerfully immanent but physically deceased composer. After the ceremonious submissions to the assembled audience in the form of a curtsy, the conductor turns his back to it. The initial ceremonies presumably entail an unspoken, traditionally borne down arrangement between conductor and listeners by dint of which the former seeks and the latter confer permission, for the duration of the performance, to function as the deceased author's sole and irrefutable interpreter, intermediary, representative and reincarnation. It is perhaps not a coincidence that classical music as we hear it now attained its Baroque complexity of form and grammar during the very epochs of European history that saw benevolent despotism thriving. For the duration of the performance again, the audience in course of the same initial decorous exchange of curtsies and applause communicates its unquestioning willingness not to disrupt the spectacle it is allowed to witness either with untimely, unseemly bodily reactions or with any effort to breach the distance between itself and the musicians of flesh and blood performing live but pedestaled on the proscenium. The formal black and somewhat antiquated dress code of the conductor and

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other musicians is meant to tacitly underline the forbiddance of proximity. It is intended to be a Stoic spectacle, in which all emotional upheavals occasioned by the music is shared temperately and tempered through a regulatory etiquette of body movements. Controlled catharsis aimed at modulating and moderating the all-consumingly Dionysian powers of music into the more palatably Orphic and Apollonian is the desired effect.

To use a fresh gastronomic analogy, then, an orchestra and a formal high table banquet do not have too much to distinguish them in terms of the grammar expected to have been internalised by the attending invitees. This calls for rare and implicitly voluntary devotion on the part of each and every member of the assembly, active participants who play and passively active participants who are listening under the unwritten but fairly rigorous socio-aesthetic contract discussed above. The devotion is both abstract and concrete. It is abstract in that it is directed preeminently towards the sensuous power of the music and by extension to the master composer's invisible spirit. That abstract devotion to the spell cast by music, the aura of the composer's reputation preserved through the centuries is concretely, tangibly, actively and politically reinforced through the spatial stratification, understated rigour in sartorial restrictions, technological ingenuity and intricacy, *a priori* dissemination of the rules of orderly listening, and above all, through the pedestaled presence of the imposingly authoritative Prospero-like conductor wielding a baton. The baton is ostensibly a magic wand successfully casting a magic spell on one and all from the first twitch of the fingers of the upraised right hand. On a subtler level, it may be said to operate as a disciplining agent, a genial euphemism for the censorial schoolmaster's rod.

One wonders how children are meant to respond to such a scenario. Again, the era in which classical music was formalized, going by Lockean empiricism, the child was considered epistemologically undernourished. It takes a precociously restrained child to control the

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involuntary bodily reflexes of the chance sneeze, the chance cough, or general restiveness induced by prolonged seating. In other words, the prearrangement with the intended listener is also that they should have been trained in restraining their mind and body in particular ways for the magic to penetrate and pervade their entire being. The pedagogy of classical music is not confined to the aesthetics of the music itself. It necessarily spills over onto other areas of corporeal and sensory self-discipline. Lest there be a breach, there is the conductor's stick, and the vicariously circulated awe of seeing his commanding body disciplining all the flock on the stage, all pairs of eyes deferentially planted on his facial expressions and hand movements, and looking away from him. If the musicians looked anywhere, it was only perhaps to catch a quick look at the printed music sheets propped up on a stand.

Most importantly, this grand, live feast of sound is for all intents and purposes produced without the obtrusive mediation of electronic gadgetry. No cumbersome wires show. No microphones are allowed in sight, not even on the lapels of beautiful black gowns. The auditorium is carefully selected precisely because of its acoustic advantage and abetment. The impression conveyed is one of authentic sound of authentic music, old but of undiminished aural and cultural value, interpreted, produced and transmitted to a live audience perfectly keyed in, like the perfectly keyed in instruments that are themselves vintage and of premier provenance.

As with interpersonal equations among members of the orchestra and between them and the commissioned conductor, as with the trained self disciplining on the part of the playing musicians with regard to the ups and downs of their life outside music, as with all the careful planning of the gala spectacle, the overriding priority is not to let the scaffolding show and to present an impeccably managed spectacle that leaves the already awestruck listener further overawed at the ingenuity and virtuosity touching each and every detail of this staged grandeur.

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Such music is deeply and frankly celebratory of human genius seasoned, tempered and meliorated through cultural evolution.

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