

3-15-97

Symphony

Tonight, I'm going to the SYMPHONY. My thinking of the evening in full caps goes back a very long way. The anticipation has seldom varied. A necessary beginning to the evening is the delicious cacophony of the partially assembled orchestra musicians warming up individually. The warm-up may begin with a single clarinet playing a scale or running through phrases of one of the pieces to be performed. One time I especially enjoyed a single cello rehearsing what must have been a difficult couple of bars. Soon she was joined by a horn working on a different phrase. Gradually other instruments joined them, each rehearsing other phrases from the Beethoven Ninth Symphony, the one work to be played that evening. I doubt that any two instruments were playing in concert; rather the wonderful effect came from sixty-five instruments being played as solo instruments, combining into a soul-stirring combination of disparate sounds that just missed anarchy. I still love to relax into that chaotic period, letting the notes wrap about me and enter my head. Suddenly, the din ceases with the arrival of the concertmaster who faces the players, thus signaling the oboe to sound its mournful, clear A. Most of the instruments, the woodwinds and brasses, tune obediently to that sound, followed by the concertmaster's tuning his instrument. A brief moment of violins, violas, and cellos joining the concertmaster ends in hushed silence in anticipation of the appearance of the maestro for the evening. The ritual has not changed in the more than half century I've been listening.

I love those minutes which are as important a part of the musical evening as the actual performance, dating back to my introduction to the symphony concert when I was a child of seven. The tingling of my elbows participating in that ceremony of the orchestra prepared me for whatever program I was to hear that afternoon. In fact, the tuning, not the music on the program, was often the highlight of my many Sunday afternoons out with Mother. Sometimes I became impatient with the length of the musical program.



I don't remember any one piece of music that I heard in the year or two when we attended the concerts of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. I do remember the conductor, Dr. Paul Van Katwijk, dean of the SMU music school, for years the epitome to me of a musician and of a Dutchman, his wiry fringe of brown hair standing out in a kind of halo circling his almost bald head. I liked the sight of his formal clothes, his coat tails swaying in rhythm with his stride on his way to the podium and echoing the rhythm of the music he conducted. His extended arms, the right hand elongated by his baton, were my cue to wriggle back into my seat and start selectively listening to my favorite instruments.

Our seats were midway down the right side of McFarlin Auditorium, a position enabling me to see what was happening on the stage. The orchestra was seated in an arc around the conductor, with risers providing a good view of the percussion, some of the reeds, and the bass viola. The music I heard must not have been important to me; I remember only the individual sounds I was able to isolate both visually and occasionally aurally from the instruments. I first looked near the back of the stage on the right, where I saw some shiny brown pipes which ended in ivory rings. I had learned to identify them as bassoons, but I was never sure of the sound they made. Their appearance was important to me; I especially liked to count the number of bassoons, feeling that the best music came when the full orchestra offered four or five of them. Sometimes I thought I could hear their bass underpinning of sound.

Then I might check on the left side of the stage to see if the music called for a harp. I enjoyed seeing the harpist pull her golden instrument into her arms and stroke its strings, producing soul tingling runs. After I checked out the harpist, I frequently turned to the whole first violin section, thrilling to the uniform movement of the bows producing their soaring primary sounds. I marveled at their precision and was especially interested when the second violins had their own up-and-down movements. I frequently speculated on the violinists' coordinating their bowing in order to produce unity of motion; indeed, the strings' bowing kept me interested when I became bored with the music itself. They were always coordinated, but I wondered how they got that way. When I found out about the concertmaster, I wondered if he kept an eye on the whole string section to be sure they stayed in line.

I also liked to watch the cellists cradle their instruments between their knees, especially the sole woman cellist with her full black silk skirt. The cello sound was easily my favorite sound, and I sometimes imagined that I'd like to learn to play the cello.

However, the most fun came in watching the timpanist. In the first place, his semi-circle of bright copper kettles attracted me. I was occasionally disappointed when there was no timpanist on the back row. I knew that there would always be quiet motion where the timpanist was, even if he weren't playing, and, since I was learning to read music, I wondered what his music looked like. In those days, a timpanist spent the entire performance with his ear close to the surface of his drum, tapping the skin and constantly making minute adjustments to the controls in order to achieve the exact tuning for the exciting sounds his instrument added to the music. Today I miss that constant tuning that is no longer necessary because of improved stability made possible by improved drum

heads. But I still thrill to the dramatic statements or the menacing rolls the timpanist adds to the atmosphere of the music. Imagine the Verdi *Requiem* tonight without the tympani!

The sounds washing over, around, and beyond me, I must have "heard" the music, for years later I would suddenly discover many familiar passages although I have no recollection of individual pieces I heard. The dominant effect in those young days was visual with some isolated sound impressions. Today I look forward to hearing favorite symphonies or concertos or to hearing a new work, but I still want to lose myself in the preliminary tuning-up ritual with all its sound and fury, followed by its beautiful unity. So, tonight as much as I look forward to the drama and passion of the *Requiem*, I know I need first to have my ears adjusted by the musicians' tuning of their instruments, individually and together.

