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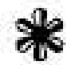
CHAPTER 4

A Separate World



As we watch, the musicians file onto the stage. All are wearing black, the men in tuxedos with white shirts and bow ties and the women in black ankle- or floor-length dresses. Those whose instruments are portable are carrying them, in the way musicians do the world over, as if they were extensions of themselves and of their bodies. Their demeanor is restrained but casual, and they talk together as they enter and move to their allotted seats. Their entry is understated, quiet; there is none of the razzmatazz, the explosion of flashpots and the flashing of colored lights, the expansive gestures, the display of outrageous clothing, that marks the arrival on stage of many popular artists. Nor does the audience react to their arrival. Not even a round of applause greets their appearance, while they in turn behave as if unaware that some two thousand people are watching them. They seem in fact to inhabit a separate world from the audience, which watches them as from a distance and will in a few minutes listen to them as if through a visually and acoustically transparent but socially opaque screen at the edge of the platform.

Once seated, they talk to colleagues, fine-tune their instruments, play scales and little snatches of melody, perhaps practicing a difficult passage in one of tonight's pieces or just amusing themselves. For a few brief moments before the appearance of the conductor, the stage is the orchestral musicians' territory and their playground, and they seem to enjoy their possession of it. The overall sound, though uncoordinated, is playful and pleasant to hear, but it is for themselves, not the audience, that they are playing. The playground is private, and what they are playing is none of the audience's business.

All public behavior sends a message about the relationship of those who are exhibiting it to those who watch it. It seems to me that the message of these musicians' onstage behavior is that of their professional exclusivity,

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of their belonging to a world that the nonmusicians who sit beyond the edge of the stage cannot enter. Their exclusivity is heightened by the fact that they have entered the building through their own entrance and have remained in their own backstage accommodation, to which the audience has no access, until the time comes to play. They will address not a single word to the listeners in the course of the performance; we shall not hear their natural voices but only the ritual voices of their instruments as they play.

The separation of performers from audience is, of course, not unique to symphony concerts; theaters, sporting events and popular concerts all keep the performers out of the spectators' sight until the time comes for them to perform. The custom seems to stem from a desire to protect the mysterious power of the performers, a mystery that refers perhaps to the very fountainhead of the performance arts, the healing performances of the shaman. But in few other kinds of event do the performers make it quite so clear that they live in a different world from the audience as in a symphony concert.

We note, too, another aspect of their behavior that sets them apart from the audience: their uniform mode of dress. A uniform diminishes the individuality of those who wear it, subordinating individuals to the collective identity. People in uniform are behaving not as themselves but as representatives of the organization whose uniform it is, and it is to the organization, not to themselves, that the responsibility for their actions belongs. This is seen very clearly in warfare, where soldiers captured in civilian clothes are treated very differently from those taken in uniform; they are felt to be somehow cheating the rules.

The nature of the uniform says something about the nature of that collective identity. For the professional soldier it bestows status, with a hint of sexual power, while for the policeman it is an emblem of state authority. In the case of those musicians of earlier times who were in the service of great families, their uniform emphasized their low status, for it was the livery of the servants, which we have seen that most of them were. In the mid-eighteenth century, Josef Haydn, director of music to the Esterhazy family of princes and famous across the whole of Europe, wore servant's livery and was relieved to find that he had been seated at table (the servants' table, of course) above the cook.

The uniform that tonight's musicians wear is ambiguous in its nature and its meaning. Outside the concert hall, evening dress of this kind is seen much less frequently than in former years, and tends to be worn today by high-status males at formal functions, to emphasize that status. At the same time it is the working garb of their senior house servants, like Hudson in

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the endless TV series *Upstairs, Downstairs*. It thus locates the musicians in a social between-stairs, on the one hand proclaiming their social equality with the members of the audience and on the other suggesting their continuing status as providers of services for the upper classes. In the United States, that continuing bastion of upper-class privilege, where orchestras are often the private fiefdoms of the very wealthy families that bankroll them, it might signify as much the latter as the former.

Here tonight it reminds us that these virtuosi, all of them masters of their instruments and possessed of a will and an individuality of their own, are expected to submerge those skills and that individuality in the collective performance. And not even to a collective will; it is the will of one man who is set in authority over them.

There is perhaps another message that the formal dress and the stylized behavior send to those who are alert to it. Since professional concert musicians the world over dress and behave in this manner and since male evening dress is a style that has changed remarkably little over the past century or so (women were excluded from professional orchestras until well into the twentieth century; as late as the 1930s the conductor Sir Thomas Beecham was complaining publicly that "women *ruin* music!"), it tells us, as do the dress and stylized gestures of a priest celebrating mass, that musicians, like priests, may come and go, but the music, like the liturgy, goes on forever. The parallel with priests is not accidental. Musicians of the Western classical tradition often perceive themselves, and are perceived, as having a kind of priestly function, as the bearers of something sacred and eternal, something that transcends time and human life. I remember, for example, a celebrated American pianist who used to be billed, without apparent irony, as "The High Priestess of Bach."

Then again, if we look at nineteenth-century pictures of performances in concert halls, one sees that all the men, both musicians and audience, are portrayed as wearing full evening dress. Over the years since then it seems that the dress of audiences has become less formal while that of the orchestral musicians has not, suggesting perhaps that the modern division of the participants in a symphony concert into two societies may be more recent in origin than we think.

Some performing groups, especially those specializing in contemporary avant-garde music, have affected a uniform that is a stylized version of everyday dress, appearing maybe in colored open-necked shirts or roll-necked sweaters with black trousers, apparently to convey the message that the musicians have shucked off the formality and the distancing of the conventional symphony concert and have entered into a new and revolutionary relationship with their audience, in parallel with the technical revolution

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wrought by the composers whose works they are playing. But in fact, as with the musical works themselves, nothing of importance has changed; one set of conventions has been replaced by another. The concert pieces remain concert pieces, and the uniform remains a uniform, which continues to set the musicians apart from the listeners.

The musicians live in a paradoxical world. On the one hand they are, every one of them, highly tuned virtuosi, many of whom, but for luck or temperament or simply because of playing the wrong kind of instrument (the number of trombonists or tuba players who have succeeded in making a solo career is tiny compared to that of pianists or violinists), could have themselves made solo careers. They work very hard and are rightly proud of their skills and of the way in which they deploy them. They are generally well paid, even if less so in recent years, and their profession enjoys a social status that is respectable and even considered glamorous. And although any glamour they themselves might initially have felt the job to have quickly wears off under everyday work pressures, they do feel themselves generally to be heirs and guardians of a great tradition.

But most orchestral musicians do not investigate their feelings about this very deeply. In my experience it is difficult to get them to talk about the art they practice with such skill. They will talk about the virtues and failings of conductors and colleagues and about which member of the orchestra is sleeping with which. They will complain about the impossible bowings the composer has asked of them and of his apparent ignorance of the most elementary aspects of fiddle technique; even those who are regarded as The Great Composers are not immune to such criticism. They will talk about the latest round of pay talks, about the scandalous contrast between what they are being paid and what conductors and soloists receive, and about the often desperate measures that are being taken to keep the orchestra alive in the face of inflated star fees and the drying up of subsidies. They resemble, in fact, the members of any other occupational group in that they will engage in any amount of shop talk, gossip, and locker-room humor.

But rarely do they question the nature of the relationships within which they work. That certain kinds of relationships within the band are necessary for the performance of the music is an article of faith and scarcely discussed. This is due not to any deficiency in intelligence but to the fact that the training they received in music college or conservatory, like all professional training whether medical, legal, academic, military, or whatever, has been directed as much toward the acceptance of the profession's assumptions and the maintenance of its esprit de corps as it has been toward the acquisition of the skills that are necessary to practice it; and like most professionals

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in any field whatsoever, most orchestral musicians have come to accept those assumptions unquestioningly.

In general their attitude is more that of the craftsman than that of the autonomous artist. They accept without question whatever is given them to play, provided that it is competently enough written, leaving others, the composer and the conductor, to take responsibility for the performance as a whole. Their responsibility is to their own instrumental part, which they will play as well as they are capable. That is their job, to play what composers have provided for them to play, and the composer's job is to provide it. It seems a fair division of labor, and they are inclined to resent those contemporary composers who require them to invent material for themselves to play—generally within limits that he determines, of course. They reason, not without justice, that if he gets the critical acclaim for the piece—and collects the performing rights fees—then he should not leave creative tasks to them. It is a strange reversal of the situation that existed in the improvising orchestras of the seventeenth century, whose members would have felt their skills were being insulted if a composer were to write out everything they were to play.

Similarly, they feel it is the conductor's job to mediate between them and the score which they never see as they play, to show them how to relate musically, on the one hand, to the composer and the material he has provided and, on the other, to one another as they play. If he does this well they will respect him, and if he does it badly they will despise him; but rarely if ever do they question the nature of those relationships or ask if they really need constantly to play someone else's notes, whether they really need someone to mediate their relationships with one another, with the composer or with his works. They may grumble and smolder under the conductor's authority and constantly test it and his knowledge of the score, in large and petty ways, even sometimes engaging in a kind of guerrilla warfare with him, and they may criticize the way the composer writes for their instrument, but seldom if ever will they seriously question the right of one to tell them what to play or of the other to tell them how to play it.

Also accepted more or less without question is that these relationships should be authoritarian and hierarchical. Under the conductor is the leader, or concertmaster, who acts as mediator between the players and the conductor; below him are the various leaders and subleaders of the sections, and below them are the "rank-and-file" players. It is of interest that it should be a term borrowed from that most hierarchical of organizations, the military, that is used of those orchestral players who are not section leaders or subleaders and never play a part on their own.

The modern professional symphony orchestra is in fact the very model

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of an industrial enterprise, permeated through and through with the industrial philosophy, and directed like all industrial enterprises toward the making of a product, in this case a performance. Its social relations are those of the industrial workplace, being entirely functional and depending only on the job to be done; members may know and care nothing of colleagues' lives apart from the job, and if, as in other jobs, friendships do develop, they are irrelevant to the task to be performed. The written notes and the conductor's gestures control the actions of the players as they play and mediate their relationships. If the second horn likes the phrase the first oboe has just played, he or she cannot play it unless the composer has authorized it.

As in other jobs, too, the rank and file are rarely consulted about the nature of the product to be made (which is to say, the pieces that are to be played) but are required simply to play the notes that are set before them, under the direction of as dynamic a managerial type as it is possible to engage. Time is money; they are generally unwilling to work extra time without extra pay (though the desperate straits in which some orchestras find themselves today sometimes oblige the players to do so just to keep the orchestra alive), while the foreman (known as the leader, or concertmaster) acts as middleman between rank and file and higher management.

There is a rigid division of labor within the organization, with each player highly skilled on a single instrument or a few related instruments. This again is in the interest of efficient production of a performance, but it is by no means a necessary condition of highly developed concerted music making, as can be seen in the Balinese gamelan orchestra, where each player expects, and is expected, to take a turn on each instrument. There is also a distinct social hierarchy, with the string players accorded the highest status (white-collar, one might say), the brass and percussion having on the other hand a distinct blue-collar image, being generally regarded as jolly fellows, not oversensitive, and given to the consumption of large quantities of beer. The leader, or concertmaster, is always a violinist, a relic perhaps of the days when the leader of the first violins gave the beat and generally controlled the performance (Johann Strauss Jr. was leading his Viennese dance orchestra in this way as late as the 1880s), showing the continuing force of the tradition.

The musical skills that are required of a professional orchestral musician are without question of a high order; in a good orchestra substantial mistakes in the notes are rare and breakdowns almost unknown. At the same time those skills are very specialized and fall within a limited range, consisting of technical dexterity, the ability to sight-read and to respond rapidly to the notations and to the conductor's gestures, as well as those of attuning one's playing to that of the ensemble. Skills that are prized in

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other traditions, such as those of improvising and memorizing, are of little use to orchestral musicians and tend to atrophy; naturally they form no part of their training. Even longer-term musical thinking is left to the conductor; I remember my astonishment at being told by a respected orchestral double-bass player that when he played a concert he read his part measure by measure and often could not remember the measure that he had just played.

The appearance of an undifferentiated collectivity that is presented by the orchestra on the platform is no illusion. The players, however individualistic and idiosyncratic their personalities may be off the platform, have to submerge themselves in the collective performance as if they themselves were mere instruments on which the conductor plays. Although those with inside knowledge about the orchestra may know that the first flute is Mr. X and the first oboe Señor Y, both marvelous virtuosi, to the average listener they are just sounds that emerge from the ensemble (it occurs to me as I write that my saying "first flute" and not "first flutist" in itself suggests the extent to which players become nonpersons on the orchestral platform, as if the instruments were playing themselves). They receive from the audience little individual acknowledgment of their superb finger technique, breath control, bowing, or exquisite phrasing (the esteem of colleagues is of course another matter). And even less notice is taken of those who play in, for example, the second violins; they are anonymous entities who, as long as they measure up to a certain level of competence and experience, are to all practical purposes interchangeable. Indeed they sometimes are, as shown by allegations a few years back that in some performances by one of the major London orchestras as many as 40 percent of the players were substitutes engaged by regular players while they themselves undertook more lucrative commercial work.

It is small wonder, then, that frustration should be a common occupational disease of symphony orchestra players and boredom another or that a third should be symptoms of stress, relieved often enough by beta-blockers or a couple of gins before the performance (a fourth, revealed by a 1992 survey, is hearing loss, apparently worse among orchestral violinists than that suffered even by musicians in heavy-metal bands). The stress has undoubtedly become exacerbated in recent years by the desperate competition for work among musicians and the remorseless demand for technical perfection in the CD era, where a split note can cost a job. It is no wonder that players are not inclined to take those risks that can lead to exciting and exhilarating performances. No wonder, either, that the number of conductors who can rouse the players from that boredom and feeling of routine as they play Beethoven's Fifth Symphony or Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto for the two-dozenth time this season, is small indeed.

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For the modern musical profession to emerge and with it the institution of the modern concert, several ideas had to come together. All these ideas are taken for granted today, but none of them is in fact an essential or universal element of musical performance.

The first is the idea that music is for listening to rather than performing, and linked with that is the second idea, that public music making is the sphere of professionals. Amateurs may perform in the home and in certain other limited fields—for example, choirs—but in the public domain the dominance of professionals is virtually complete. The third idea is that of a formal and independent setting where people come together solely for the purpose of performing and listening to music, and the fourth is that of each individual listener's paying for admission to the place where the performance is taking place, with the ticket of admission as the sign of having paid.

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These factors are interrelated and interdependent, and it was not until well into the nineteenth century that all four were in place in Western musical culture and giving birth to the modern musical profession. The axis of change seems to have been around the year 1600. It was then that the first operas, the first dramatic musical presentations indubitably intended for an audience of spectator-listeners, were created and with them the art of musical representation and tonal harmony. Those are matters that I shall discuss later.

The first independent settings for the public performance of music, to which admission was gained by the passing of money, were opera houses, the earliest of which opened in Venice in 1637. Concert halls, as we have seen, were a later invention. Once the buildings were built, then the economics of their running and maintenance led inexorably to the admission of more people. With more and more people attending, it became customary for people to accept the company of strangers in their most intimate musical moments; we are told that in 1749 some twelve thousand people attended a rehearsal of Handel's *Royal Fireworks Music* in Vauxhall Gardens in London, causing a traffic jam on London Bridge that lasted several hours. The company of connoisseurs and friends that attended the aristocratic performances was, in the emerging mercantile society of England, already becoming the anonymous public.

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The takeover by professionals, on the other hand, appears not to have taken place until the first half of the nineteenth century. Until then members of the European aristocracy thought it a perfectly normal pursuit for a gentleman or a gentlewoman to engage in musical performance, and the task of professional musicians was to assist them in that pursuit. Outside of the opera house, full-time professional orchestras were virtually unknown

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in Europe and America until well into the nineteenth century; amateurs and professionals playing alongside one another was the rule. The orchestras that gave the early performances of the symphonies of Beethoven were a mixture of amateurs and professionals, and even many of the pianists for whom Mozart wrote his concertos were what we would call amateurs. Naturally so; an important function of orchestras was to give people the chance to play together, and it was the job of composers to give them something to play.

When Weber compiled his guide to Germany for itinerant musicians in 1820, many of the best musicians he listed were amateurs. Only in opera houses were there anything like fully professional full-time orchestras, and even there, in all but the largest houses, local artisans and tradesmen formed a substantial part of orchestras as well as choruses until well into the nineteenth century. Those orchestras did give occasional concerts when the opera house was not functioning—during Lent, for example—but mostly on an ad hoc basis.

The coming of the traveling virtuoso-entrepreneur ended that situation. It was not just that Liszt, Paganini, and a host of others pushed amateurs, who could not hope to match their spectacular technical achievements, off the stage, nor was it just that composers, beginning possibly with the later Beethoven, were beginning to make demands on orchestral musicians that amateurs could not meet. It was that the virtuosi, recognizing the enormous commercial potential of the new middle class, eager to display its wealth and power but individually unable to afford a musical establishment of their own as had the older aristocracy, used their powers of display to seize control of public musical life. Those wealthy middle-class males who took over leadership in musical matters from the aristocracy had less leisure than the aristocrats to develop their musical skills, and middle-class women were not encouraged to appear in public at all; the home was expected to be their sphere of activity. In any case women were not encouraged to learn orchestral instruments; for them the piano and their own voices were generally the only instruments that were considered appropriate.

The first full-time professional symphony orchestras were the Vienna Philharmonic and, surprisingly, the New York Philharmonic, both founded in 1842; by around 1850 amateurs had more or less disappeared from the public stages of the great musical centers of Europe and, a little later, of the United States of America. They appear today only in corners of their own, where allowances can be made for their lack of professional polish. Professionals may earn pocket money by providing a "stiffening" to amateur orchestral performances or by playing offbeat instruments like

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contrabassoon or bass tuba when the score calls for them, generally with a slight air of condescension.

The elimination of the amateur performer—and with even more force, of the amateur composer—from the public platform speaks of a profound change of attitude. Musical works were made for playing, and now they are for listening to, and we employ professionals to do our composing and playing for us. A piece of music is written not to give performers something to play but in order to make an impact on a listener, who is its target. The greater the impact on the listener, the better the composition.

What the piece's impact may be on the performer is largely incidental, and seldom if ever discussed in the literature, though in fact some pieces that are favorites among concert audiences are loathed by the orchestra musicians who play them. I remember my own composition teacher, whom I had asked whether a passage in an orchestral piece I was writing would be grateful to play, telling me, "Don't worry about that. You write it: they'll play it." Perfectly reasonable, of course; the musicians are being paid and if they don't like it they can get another job, just as in any other occupation in the modern world. (But after the piece had its first and only performance some of my carefully copied orchestral parts came back to me with some very unflattering comments scribbled across them.)

This change in attitude follows logically when we accept the idea that musical meaning is enshrined uniquely in musical works. That being so, we shall want to hear them played as perfectly as possible. But we should realize that the price we pay for that perfection is high.

The price is that the majority of people are considered not to have the ability to take an active part in a musical performance. They are excluded from the magic world of the musicians, whose separateness is symbolized so lucidly here by the division of the concert hall into two. They are fated to be no more than consumers of the music that is produced for them by professionals. They pay for the commodity, music, but they have no more say in what is produced than do consumers of any other commodity; they have only the choice of either buying or not buying.

As they wait for the conductor's arrival, the musicians of the orchestra eye the audience warily and covertly across the barrier of the platform edge. To them it is collectively a fickle creature that changes its nature every night. They have to please it in order to make a living, but they privately despise it for its ignorance of the musical skills and mysteries to which they themselves are privy and for the unreliability of its judgment, especially in regard to conductors. They do not want their world to be too close to that of the audience; and individually and collectively, they guard jealously their privacy and their distance from the public.

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It appears that the event may well mean different things for the inhabitants of the two worlds, even perhaps that the interests of the two are different and in some respects opposed. What for members of the audience may at its best be a transcendental experience of communication with a great musical mind, for the orchestra members may be just another evening's work and even, for some, a time of boredom and frustration.

Whatever the event may be celebrating, it does not seem to be unity, unanimity or intimacy but rather the separation of those who produce from those who consume and the impersonal relationships of a society whose dominant mode of relating is through the passing of money. I have to emphasize once again that I do not believe that to be the whole meaning of the event. But it is another strand that has to be taken into account when we try to assess the rich texture of human relationships that are being generated by a symphony concert as a whole.

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