

Tuesday Night Series

It's 15 minutes past the program time -- a half hour since I took my seat -- and the stork-like pianist has yet to play his first note. The room is at capacity, which is something of a surprise since the listing in the paper had the wrong phone number for tickets.

I'm by myself this evening and uncomfortably aware of it. After a decade's hiatus from the world of serious dating, I yearn for intimacy -- soft pressures of flesh and prolonged lapses into languor with someone I can promise to call, wave goodbye to, and choose to see again or not according to whim. Yet I sit here alone with envious thoughts, watching a parade of the beautiful people arrive in self-absorbed twos and threes. Delighting in themselves, they're oblivious to my ruminations.

The situation reinforces that cloak of unworthiness advancing age has bestowed upon me. Yet in my psyche I am less than a heartbeat away from that uncertain teenager who sat in this same room 65 years ago acutely aware of inadequacies rooted in youth and inexperience. Then, however, pride held fast the mask of insouciance. Now such self-indulgence is long gone, leaving in its stead the unholy dread that older people have of appearing foolish. "Oh God," goes my fervent prayer. "Please don't let me behave like an old fart."

As is true with most symphony audiences, the 60-and-up crowd has found seats prior to the eight o'clock curtain time. By five-after all but a handful of seats are taken, their occupants engaged in knots of conversations that gather momentum in waves. Two men behind me discuss their efforts at writing definitive works on esoteric mathematical subjects ("I need to clean up a few of Von Neumann's theories," says one in utter seriousness, owning up several minutes later to his inability to remember which ones).

The pair of mid-fortyish women next to me abandon talk of the arts for the more fertile subject of allowing new guys into their lives. For just an instant I feel the stirrings of possibility but something in their commingled perfumes and the use of the word "guys" dampens my enthusiasm. "I'm not going to waste my time on them," I tell myself, aware at the core that I'd endure talk-show gossip in trade for an hour or two of coziness with either. The word "horny" comes to mind and I consider it, dismissing it finally in a temporizing recognition: I'm horny, fair enough, but not *that* horny.

At this moment the evening's performer emerges from the wing and steps to the center of the stage, drawn there by the rising volume of applause. Gawky-looking in starched white bib and tails, he acknowledges the warm welcome with a harrowed grin and launches into a vacuous recounting of Beethoven's foibles.

While the audience settles in to what shows every sign of becoming a lengthy digression, its focus is suddenly seized by the arrival of a bevy -- there can be no better word for it -- of young ladies attired in outfits that would have stolen the show at Cinderella's ball. Up they mince to the very front row where seats await them under the protection of their pretty-boy beaux. While Beethoven raises his bloodless hell with chambermaids on-stage, Boopsie and her buddies flounce and fluff and preen to the arrested attention of the assemblage. Only our narrator seems oblivious to the monumental bit of upstaging that has taken place.

I am enthralled by the sheer tastelessness of the spectacle, incensed at the impact it seems likely to have on the evening's performance, and amused that I and all the other "culture-lovers" in the audience could so easily be diverted from the noble purpose at hand. It is, I decide, proof-positive of life's ability to meet pomposity with just the right amount of twinkle-dust. At the very moment something monumental is about to take place, absurdity comes to the rescue, pulling us back from the brink. Oblivious to the situation, our man-of-the-hour comes to the end of his prattling in time to salvage some morsel of market-share by seating himself on the flimsy bench and going down his checklist of preparations for the task to come.

As he draws within himself, I find myself going through a similar catechism, the object of which lies in the vague recognition that the moments of our lives are strung together on nearly continuous instances of things teetering in some sort of precarious balance. We only grant significance to a few such instances I decide, and immediately I envision the synapse and wonder if there is logic in the association or whether I am approaching the edge of my spiritual envelope.

One instant I feel the seatback against my shoulder blades, the next I cartwheel through space, cast in a kaleidoscopic jumble of streaking images as my contact with reality spirals away into an abysmal...what? But just as suddenly I recoil violently back into the absolute here-and-now.

Banished without echo are the fears and doubts of that demi-life. I am surrounded by the inevitability of the moment. I coalesce under the tug of pieces of that unseen, unknown, unknowable something dubbed dark-matter by caretakers of uncharted light years who serve to affirm the non-soul version of the universal binding force.

Thus it is now a becoming in the rustle of excitement that is part of all departures. In an instant of B-Rated hocus-pocus we see the uncertain pianist replaced by his alter ego in ancient master form. As if controlled by unseen hands, he is collected like a Lipizzaner about to perform piaffe. Before our eager eyes he assumes the proportions we've longed for.

He rocks forward, pauses for an instant, then begins.

The first note, first measure, first stanza, appear ... merge ... blend ... and overwhelm so that we are not aware that there are other intervals to follow. We are caught in the master's snare except that we find the trap sprung from within ourselves. It's tempting to say that it's a place all great musicians know and know how to find and then invoke. Bach knew it. Certainly Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Brahms...one can hardly dispute their claims. But for Beethoven it was not a matter of knowing, or finding, or invoking. It was the home he lived in so he didn't have to waste the time getting there.