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Classical puts me to sleep

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Sometimes I fall asleep right away. Even before the orchestra turns the first page of music, I lean my head into my hand, propped up by the armrest, and let my eyelids fall. At first, though, the closing of my eyes comes as something of a shock. I would have just started watching the bows go up and down across the violins and violas and back and forth across the cellos and basses in a grand unison; I would have just started watching the conductor's arms and backside jerk and sway, not precisely with the music but in the slightest anticipation; I would have just started watching the musicians, their eyes fixed onto the papers in front of them, their movements nothing more than those required by the music. Upon closing my eyes all this is gone. It is replaced by a dark, reddish-grey curtain, with a large block of faint light in the middle – the ghost image of the stage. My eyes at first search my eyelids with the same focus they used to watch the orchestra, and this large, abstract shape, because of its sudden closeness, makes my eyelids snap back open. Upon opening, however, the shock of sudden darkness is replaced by a dull recognition: I immediately see the orchestra, and realise that nothing has changed and nothing is likely to change. The violinists are still sawing away, the conductor still has on his black coat, and the rows of heads in front of me are exactly as I had left them. So I leave them again, and upon the next inevitable closing of my eyes, my eyelids cause no anxiety. The curtain of darkness is recognised as the far more familiar and comfortable sight.

Soon, thankfully, my attention at last leaves my eyes and drifts back toward the music, which then seems remarkably different. There is no one swaying in anticipation; the music moves completely in its own time. There is not a certain number of musicians in unison, but a certain strength of sound. There is no movement, no pages, no instruments, no black coats, only live, acoustic music with its unmistakably earthy texture. 'How lovely this sounds', I think to myself, leaning my head further into my hand, and then: 'how lovely this feels'. With my eyes closed the music comes from the entire room, not just the stage, and it feels very close to my ears, as close as my eyelids are to my eyes. Then, at last, my attention leaves the music and I start to drift off. This moment of rapture is one of disengagement.

Still, I don't *want* to fall asleep – it's embarrassing, it's indecorous, it's disrespectful – and I find myself on trial. Do I do what *feels* right (fall asleep), or do I do what I know *is* right (pay attention)? With my eyes closed the music is at its most soothing and intimate and this feels wonderful. But also in this intimacy, teetering on the brink of sleep, slouched in my chair, I reach a place of deep ambivalence.

When I was younger, faced by the supreme pleasure of slumber, I would think, 'wait, this is bad', and open my eyes again. My parents or relatives would have taken me to this concert not just to enjoy myself but *to learn* about this ancient and important form of art. I would even take it upon myself to wear a button-down shirt and nice shoes for the occasion. I knew it was a high-class, grown-up activity, having to sit for so long, perfectly quiet and motionless. It was all a part of learning the unnatural

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behaviour of adults. For another example, many times when the music stops – you're *not* supposed to clap. Falling asleep is bad, but being too enthusiastic is obscene.

Now I try to catch myself from drifting off not only out of respect for my company, but also for the musicians. A violinist with the Seattle Philharmonic told me he once gave a friend a ticket to one of his concerts. This friend was grateful for the ticket, but confessed he was dead asleep for almost the entire programme. 'I couldn't believe it', the violinist told me, 'We were up there working our asses off and he falls asleep'. It's a gesture not taken lightly, and it shouldn't be. A disregard for *anything* cannot be more sincerely expressed than by a loss of consciousness during its presentation. True, it is non-aggressive, but falling asleep is almost as bad as getting up and walking out – in both cases, one ends up completely absent. What's worse than walking out is when the song ends and the snoozers are awoken by applause. They'll clap their hands as if they knew what they were applauding. They'll even give a standing ovation, if they see everyone rising from their seats.

'No, it is not good to fall asleep', I'll tell myself, 'Open your eyes. Pay attention. And if you can't pay attention to the music, read the programme notes – give your eyes something to do'. OK: On the bill tonight are *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* by Mozart, followed by *Kinderszenen* by Schumann, 'Sirènes' by Debussy, Gershwin's 'Lullaby', Brahms' *Requiem*, and we'll end with Bach's 'Komm Susser Tod'.

'I don't stand a chance', I think to myself, and close my eyes immediately. It's not disrespect or a lack of social grace, it's the music. The Mozart piece translates as 'A Little Night Music'. The next piece is a nocturne, following that will be a lullaby, and following that is a requiem, Latin for 'rest'. Within these forms there are moments that are lively and even loud, but in the end the nocturne is always lulled, the lullaby hushed, and the requiem prostrate. Composers have written for this effect. One of my favourite pieces from Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, or 'Scenes from Childhood', is titled 'Kind im Einschlummern', or 'Child Falling Asleep'. Schumann creates this scene very convincingly, especially the ending. Pianist and critic Alfred Brendel writes, '. . . the conclusion is not on the tonic E minor on which the piece started, more awake than asleep; it stops on a wonderful, truly romantic A minor chord that opens up like a mouth opened by sleep' (Brendel 1976, p. 219).

Classical *itself* falls asleep. If not by its form of composition, as in a nocturne or lullaby, then by the several directives that thin the music to a tranquilising hum – *lento*, meaning slow; *adagio*, slow and easy; *legato*, slurred; *piano*, soft, which will often *decrescendo* or *diminuendo* (decrease or diminish) all the way to *pianissimo*, *very* soft. For the last quarter of 'Child Falling Asleep', for example, the sheet music calls for the notes to be played *sempre diminuendo*, or 'constantly diminishing'. Five bars before the end there is a *ritard*, a slowing down, then a *piu lento*, meaning 'a little slower', and the final, jaw-dropping chord is to be played *pianissimo* (Bauer 1945). In my cushioned seat I recall the childlike desire for sleep (even in awkward public places), and I struggle against this music to stay awake. But to stay awake is to try and overcome the genius of these composers, and I'm simply no match. Debussy's 'Sirènes', or Sirens, titled after the enchanting mermaids, is another perfect example.

'Sirènes' is a series of hypnotic crescendos and decrescendos – not only ups and downs like perfect rolling waves, but crescendos of equal value in succession, growing from pianissimo but suddenly disappearing. I try to focus on the melody, but it's as if I'm looking at its reflection on the water – the tune is coherent, but the undulations of volume make it wobble. The oboe's solo seems solid enough, backed by steady half- and quarter-notes from the violas and horns, but this is undone by the return of

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the Sirens, who leave a glimmering trail through the strings and woodwinds. The Sirens can undo anything, and in the audience I find myself straining to keep my eyes open, against the will of this gorgeous song. It's a terrible trial. When Odysseus met the challenge of the Sirens, he averted his crew from their seductive song by plugging their ears as they rowed past. Odysseus left his own ears unplugged, however, and had himself tied to the mast of his boat (Homer 1998). It's unclear exactly why he does this. Possibly to know when they are out of earshot, possibly to prove his bravery, but no reason is quite convincing. The only thing for certain in this episode is that brave Odysseus was in masochistic ecstasy strapped to his ship. He was bound to his responsibility and knew he would fulfil it, but allowed himself the unbearably sensual pleasure of the song. In the audience I realise that I too must be brave, enchanted by this music, desirous of nothing more than to surrender to sleep, but I must stay the course. I came to the concert to listen to the music and I will not fail. I will NOT close my eyes . . .

. . . Applause . . . applause! Yes! I made it. I clap to make my hands sting and stretch to get the blood moving. Now, Gershwin's 'Lullaby' – even more dangerous to my cause. But it will keep me up I think, because it will be jazzy, it will feel modern. How modern, I wonder, and pick up the programme notes: As modern as 1919.

Gershwin's lullaby is indeed jazzy, but not modern. It's classical; it sounds like history. This is how it is with all classical music. Mozart's night music was for the nights of 1787 Vienna. The Scenes from Childhood envisioned by Schumann did not take place in 1980s Seattle, like mine, they took place in late 1830s Leipzig, or two decades earlier in Zwickau, the time and place of Schumann's own childhood. In my mind's eye the characters invoked by this music don't wear clothes, but costumes. They walk to the concerts down narrow European streets, or in the case of this Gershwin tune, through old New York, before the skyscrapers. This is another reason for falling asleep: a classical concert never seems shockingly *new*; it never grabs me by the lapels (of the sport coat I wear only for classical concerts). Rather, it sets me back in time, and back in my cushioned chair. When I wake up I never turn to ask my neighbour, 'what did I miss?'

If I don't drift off to dreams at classical concerts, I drift into daydreams. With the music supplying the soundtrack, these daydreams are often historical fictions. The characters in this lullaby are out of *The Great Gatsby*. The tune sounds like it could be from one of Gershwin's sensational Broadway shows, but is slowed down. All the parties are over, and the tune takes its form as reminiscence. Gatsby is now dead, his mansion sold, Gershwin has settled down, Daisy is still upbeat and miserable – but the huge, lavish, drunken parties are wonderful to remember (Fitzgerald 1992). I can make up what I want about these people because, as I'm reminded by the programme notes, not only has Gatsby died. Mozart died in 1791, Shumann in 1856, Debussy in 1918, Gershwin in 1937, Brahms in 1897, and Bach in 1750. It's a wonderful kind of daydream to imagine the past, but it also calls upon death.

When we applaud the musicians and conductor at the end of each piece, I imagine that we are also applauding the dead composer from beyond the grave. The living deserve praise, but ultimately it's the author of this music who brought us all here tonight. The deceased are the centrepiece. Even if we have come to see a particular conductor or soloist, we have come to watch him or her conduct and play music written by the dead. There are exceptions, but a living composer on the programme always comes as a surprise – as in, 'Oh wow, this composer's still

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alive' – and we applaud him or her for representing that macabre anomaly, 'the *living* composer'.

Classical does not seem long for this world. According to many, it's already dead, though the cause of death has still not been determined. In his book, *Who Killed Classical Music?*, critic Norman Lebrecht (1998) spends 425 pages discussing possible murderers, murder weapons, and motives. But since there are so many things that apparently killed classical music – the expensive concert tickets, the domineering recording industry, the reliance on corporate and state sponsorship, the greedy agents of the greedy stars – none can be isolated and indicted. People are doing foolish and awful things in the world of classical, as they are wont to do in every industry, but no one has blood on his or her hands. What Lebrecht might consider is that maybe no one killed classical music. Maybe classical music just died, on its own, of natural causes.

This is the feeling I get, anyway, at a concert, and it makes me feel OK about nodding off. The audience is respectfully subdued, and the musicians dress in black. Before the concert they give a few perfunctory nods or make no expression at all. During the concert they recite the music staring straight ahead, while the audience sits, stone-still. At the end of the concert the conductor smiles, being the natural centre of attention, but he or she compulsively distributes the applause to the musicians, who are still so modest as to be cheerless. Classical is very well supported, as a glance at the concert hall will show, but even this great hall seems like a temple built to honour its passing. Like ancient Egyptians we believe classical can be preserved if it is mummified in money.

'That's right, classical music is dead', I recall as I close my eyes again. But as the music begins to carry me off to sleep, measure by measure, another thought gives me pause: It being dead doesn't make it any less glorious or delightful. Classical may be dead, but the sound is still warm and luscious, coming from the room all around me and pressed this close to my ears. Classical music may be dead, but as you say to kids, it's in a better place now.

Every description I've read of death-related classical music pieces, from requiems to Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' to Mahler's 9th, makes the same point: Death is not characterised as only frightening and odious, but also gentle and tranquil, even blessed. Just as it can write itself to sleep, classical music has nicely prepared itself for death. Back at the concert, playing now is Bach's 'Komm Susser Tod', or 'Come Sweet Death'. Scholar Uwe Kraemer writes of the hymn, '. . . the inwardness of the poetic content with its submission to the idea of death is deepened still further in Bach's setting [of the words in music] . . . the rising line in the second half of each verse corresponds to the urgent character of the words, while the sinking down of the music in the final bars, the major harmonies at the words ''susser'', ''Tod'', ''Ruh'' and ''Friede'' . . . indicate that a great master has set these words' (Kraemer 1975, p. 2). For Kraemer, Bach's mastery is shown by how these four concepts are united in music: 'susser' is sweet, 'tod' is death, 'ruh' is peace, and 'friede' is tranquility. In 'Komm Susser Tod', they are literally in harmony.

If classical invites death, I don't resist sleep. I close my eyes again – a familiar place, but still, ambivalent. Classical *looks* dead – it's stuck in the past, the musicians are aloof, the industry is clueless – but with my eyes closed it seems alive, I can feel it breathing. 'No, classical music is not dead', I think, slumping further into my chair, 'only sleeping', and joining the music in deep, mortal slumber is central to its rapture. To be enraptured at a classical music concert is to disengage – from propriety, from duty, from modernity, and finally, from consciousness.

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