

THRENODY FOR OUR NATION
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On Saturday night past we were treated to complementary tickets for the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. I had debated going; though the concert included Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto it featured Shostakovich's 10th Symphony. I am no fan of 'modern' classical music, by which I mean music composed after about 1910 that I hear as either unrelieved dissonance or outright cacophony. I find room for dissonance and cacophony within the realm of music, for it can add great power, but it must not drown melody. If it does, it may proclaim it transforms great ideas into sounds, but they are sounds I do not like or choose to listen to.

Just before playing the Shostakovich 10th, the conductor gave a short lecture illustrating the composer's aims. One four-note theme, repeated more often than the five-note theme in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, stood for the composer via his initials. A sweeter, six-note theme represented his mistress while some chaotic noise played between these two themes represented the composer's second wife, whom he presumably had grown to hate. A theme representing Stalin appeared in another movement. Politics was omnipresent in Shostakovich's music.

The symphony was rattling. Peaceful and clashing sections alternated abruptly and unexpectedly, much as did Shostakovich's shaky status with Stalin. Remember that artists in Stalin's Russia always lived in fear, indeed, in 1936, Stalin purged many prominent writers, musicians, artists, and scientists.

Sometimes you must listen to a piece or a style of music several times before you grow to like or appreciate it. I do not intend or expect to ever listen to the 10th Symphony again. But hearing it once was OK with me. Chalk it up to experience.

This prelude now gives way to the main point of this essay. The first piece, 8'37" of screeching, thumping dissonance, was originally named 8'37" by its duration. Some years later, the composer renamed it *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*. (Threnody = Lament – I looked it up.) During the performance, some woman shouted out an inaudible word. At first we thought that might have been part of the piece. But several minutes later she launched a second outburst, this time of several inaudible words, and it was clear she did not approve. I have reached the point in life, helped by my diplomatic mate, of holding my tongue in such circumstances, but I felt profound gratitude for what that woman did.

What followed was one of the most stunning, shocking experiences of my life. The instant the piece was over, which you would realize only if you had timed it or when the conductor turned around and bowed – at that very instant, the audience burst into some of the most histrionically enthusiastic applause I have ever heard, followed by a prolonged standing ovation. I couldn't believe it. Was it even remotely possible that so many people actually enjoyed that piece? I felt like standing up and screaming, "This puts Beethoven to shame," but I didn't.

My thoughts honed in on America's dual cultural and political chasm. I assumed that the entire cheering San Francisco audience consisted of left wingers, both hated by and hating our nation's right wing Country and Western Music denizens. No wonder the two sides can't tolerate or even begin to comprehend each other. Liberals, who gleefully recall that Nazis, Fascists, and Communists hated and suppressed atonal, dissonant music as degenerate, use that to brand Conservatives as cultural philistines while Conservatives see Liberals as arrogant and effete.

Were the audience's cheers a political statement or a legitimate musical statement? I cannot believe that anyone other than a very few diehards would ever play that horrid renamed Threnody in their homes, their cars, their workplace – anywhere, or any time. I see it far more likely to be a case of mass cultural pretentiousness. Don't get caught belittling what the next generation may recognize as great.

I also can't believe that the musicians liked *Threnody* as they thumped their instruments. Surely, I recognize their great talent. Surely, I recognize the talents, the knowledge, yes the genius of many modern composers. I also am sure of the high intelligence of the Egyptian priests who, for the millennia they controlled Egypt's granary, led the worship of gods now utterly extinct.

Every nation, every society, and every civilization cannot survive without its bleating sheep. But likewise, every nation, every society, and every civilization cannot survive without its critics and satirists. That saving grace of our nation leaves enough room for me.

But those cheers seemed to me part and parcel of the crescendo of intolerance for the 'other' that has come to be a trademark of our nation. We seem to have all the heightened hatreds and invective that led to the Civil War, but now the great issue is invisible and hence more insidious. The great issue is the unbreachable gulf in our polarized states of mind. Add to this the fact that people seem periodically to tire of the dullness of the Peaceable Kingdom and crave the blood lust of conflict and war. This all constitutes a fitting theme of a threnody for our nation.