

The Cacophony

“We wander, soul, we swim and fly and smile and, with delicate ghostly fingers, we retie the torn filaments and blissfully unite the disjointed harmonies.”

—Hermann Hesse

The ancients wrote about the music of the spheres. I shall write about the cacophony.

The composer was meticulous when placing notes on a score. Above all he sought order, to translate the random noises of the universe into sounds and then to arrange these sounds in perfect harmony with each other. He composed endlessly, from morning till night, eating only when he absolutely needed to and bathing almost never.

By the time he had become a grizzled old man, the composer realized that he had never once given a performance of his works, not even a single piece. The kind of music he wrote, while melodious, had fallen out of fashion. Its very perfection made it sound quaint. The spirit of the times dictated that only the most fashionable modern performances be well-attended, and the composer feared, not unreasonably, that no one but himself would ever understand his music.

Finally the composer managed to get a one-hour lease at a large but relatively unknown concert hall, which, unfortunately for the composer, catered almost exclusively to the avant-garde artists he despised most. He hated the syncopated rhythms and dissonant chords of the music they slapped together and was certain that no one would want to come to hear his own elegant compositions, with their precise harmonies and flawless structures. Nonetheless, the composer was determined to give a performance of the works he had spent a lifetime writing, with himself as conductor. The few strands of hair remaining on his head had all turned gray. His hands were withered with age. And he knew that this might be his last chance.

A one-hour lease....

The composer realized that the time allotted to him was short. He wondered how he could ever possibly fit into such a brief period of time all of the compositions he wished to perform. Each piece had features which he found especially attractive and compelling. Nothing of importance could be excluded.

Not knowing what else to do, the composer assembled an orchestra of several hundred musicians, one for each of the pieces he had composed. He carefully edited all of the pieces, so that each was exactly one hour in length. He then assigned one piece to each of the musicians. The composer expected each musician to read from a different score and play the separate pieces simultaneously.

The rehearsals, needless to say, were chaotic. The members of the orchestra were outraged and embarrassed by the arrangements. But the trained ear of the composer could hear each individual note make its own unique contribution to the music as a whole. To the composer, the synergy of musical themes seemed to express exactly the sense of order he found within himself and the harmony he felt with all things.

On the evening of the performance, as the curtain lifted, the composer was disappointed, but not unsurprised, to see that the concert hall was only half-full. The promoter, who had attended the rehearsals, wanted to bill the concert as featuring one of the greatest and most original works of avant garde music ever performed. But the composer had insisted that the posters for the event make reference only to the mellifluousness of the music.

And then, precisely as the clock struck the hour, the cacophony began.

As the music filled the hall, the composer swayed back and forth. His baton wove erratic patterns in the air as he sought to keep the irregular rhythms and discordant harmonies together. His spirit was lifted to other realms. An angel touched him with a broken wing and escorted him to heaven. Together they frolicked on the vaporous clouds of his own mind, each renewed and each inescapably aware of the triumphant victory.

The audience began to leave, individually at first and then in groups, and soon all the seats were empty. The musicians as well began walking out one by one. The first violinist, who had always been unwaveringly loyal to the composer, was the last to depart.

Outside a music critic was striding briskly down the cobblestone street toward the concert hall. He

was returning to pick up a program he had forgotten to take home with him the night before. As he approached the hall, he noticed that there was no music coming from inside. It was perfectly silent. The critic looked up at the marquee and was startled to discover that a concert was being held this evening. In fact, the concert should have been in progress at just that moment, approaching its climactic finish.

Passing through the foyer, the critic slowly opened the door to the main hall and peered inside. The hall was completely empty, save for one old man dancing on the conductor's platform, both hands stretched high above his head in ecstasy.

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