

Childhood Sketch #23: Music at the Library

Tonight there would be music, for tonight was Thursday and a group of young musicians, grown together through common love of classical music, would give a free concert in the assembly room on the third floor of the main public library.

David looked out at the audience. He blew through his horn to keep it warm, made sure he'd emptied the spit from it. Sitting in folding chairs were a few of their friends, some music teachers, and a group of the old men who always hung out around the library until San Francisco passed a law against it. There were about thirty people. Right before the conductor raised his hands David noticed an old man come in the back door and take a seat at the very back of the hall. For a second their eyes met.

Then the sad and mellow chords of Tchaikovsky's *Pathetique* symphony began. David, his lips to a winding horn, looked out at the audience, enjoying that inner feeling of full group participation, the making of an individual note and tone color that combined with all the others to build a melancholy chord, as the chords in turn blended into a symphonic melody that for David sang the harshness and pathos of life itself. Now the tone of the horn rose free in a lyrical solo that was yet in unity with the entire symphonic meaning. As usual, David picked one person to look at while he played, and tonight he played to the old man at the back of the hall.

He always played Tchaikovsky with a certain measure of anger, anger at those experts on classical music who considered the great composer's work overly sentimental and not very good. As far as David was concerned, there were real feelings in this music and those who negated or belittled them seemed somehow afraid of showing those feelings themselves.

But not the old man. David could see he liked the music. David wondered about the man's life. Perhaps he'd worked in a factory for many years, like David's father did. Maybe he lived in a little room on Third Street or near the waterfront.

He'd seen such men often, sometimes they asked for some change, sometimes he gave. Maybe this old man was here because of his love for music, maybe because he'd seen the mimeographed notice for the concert and taken it as a free way to pass the time. The time—what kind of life did he lead now? It must be terribly lonely. Lonely at night, lying in a little room, listening to the begging voices from the street, different voices, changing in pitch and timbre, young and old, asking, "could you spare a quarter, I've tried to be a good Christian all my life." Now and then crutches scratched on the pavement, bottles broke, foghorns sounded out in the bay. And always, endlessly, the cars flashed by, circling his little room with their lights. It must feel good for him to listen to something like this for a change. This concert was for him.

The group played several more pieces, including a spirited adaptation of one of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, and then the concert was over. David and his friend, the bassoon player, passed the old man on their way out after the concert. The old man said to David, "I don't know much about music, but tonight I listened to you and all the players and I guess that's what music is." David said politely, "I'm glad you liked it."

The bassoon player said, "let's go."

But the old man called David back. "Wait a minute please...ah...I...just wanted to tell you somethin' more, to wish you success in all that you do. Keep blowin' that horn, nobody else is ever gonna blow it for you."

"I will, thank you."

"What did that old bum have to say?" the bassoon player asked.

"Nothin'."

Later that night David thought over the old man's words, and wondered where the man was now. Keep blowin' that horn...it reminded David of something else. Once his father gave him a book called *The Art of Scientific Investigation*. In the front his father wrote: "read it, but don't take it too seriously. There's no substitute for good clear thinking. You've got to make it on your own."

You've got to make it on your own, nobody else can it for you. But make what on your own? Success in all that you do, but what should he do? Everything you did seemed to suck you into things that you opposed or found morally questionable; everything had so many complications.

Maybe it would be better to be a French horn player; it was a good life. Most musicians he knew were really fine people. If he set his lips and mind to it he could become a very capable hornist, and it would be good to do at least one thing well, instead of many things poorly and half-heartedly. Look at that old man, what kind of life was that, kicked aside by the society after being forced to pour out the sweat and tears of a lifetime in hard labor for low wages. Yes, maybe being a musician would be a way out of the mess.

David knew two things: that it had been good to play for the old man and that, without a doubt, somehow or other, he would have to make it on his own. Then, to the still echoing strains of *Pathetique*, he closed his eyes and dreamed of heroic pursuits for himself, and about an old man at the back of the hall.

(Written when I was 17 or so—1961/62—by Lincoln Bergman)