

## Champagne and Charisma

Troy Mock

I didn't notice him as I rushed toward the only open seat in the concert. The front row was my only choice; I was twenty minutes late. My internal temperature churned its uncomfortable rhythm as I sat down as quietly as possible, squeezing between songs with my cumbersome winter coat and sweaty brow. I find it so curious that the audience would rather have a seat or two buffer from the performer. They would prefer a couple of heads to block the view. It was as if the front row was *too* real, in front of the glass instead of behind it. Lucky for me, front row seats are just fine.

As the burning eyes of the audience returned to the violinist and not on my intruding back, I took a deep breath and peered at my surroundings. The Carriage House was a cozy place. The cherry floor complimented the sloped roof that rose to a neat angle thirty feet above. I couldn't see a fireplace, but the wall at the back of the room had a cast-iron stove's name written on it. At the front of the room, a violinist swung to the music of her instrument. A pianist sat behind her, massaging the ivory keys while her foot tapped the sostenuto pedal in a jagged fashion that contrasted from the movement of her hands. I settled into my front row seat, relieved that my body was reaching the calm of my mind after rushing to the concert in the bitter cold to confront the blast of warm inside air. I wasn't used to such stark temperature differences. It was my first real winter in this new city. I could barely tolerate the onslaught of the November chill, let alone the constant removal of winter clothes as I entered over-heated buildings and tried to keep my accumulated body heat to a minimum.

I had never been to an instrumental concert before. I was used to thousands of crammed bodies under booming speakers and the dodging of spilled drinks and broken plastic cups as I struggled to see the musician from afar. But in this new city, on the opposite side of the country from where I was raised, I wanted to experience all that was offered, with or without the crowds. I anticipated the violinist gracefully moving her bow across the violin with a developed poise and reservation. So when the rapid punctuation of the notes and the bickering between violin and piano reached my ears, I was baffled. It was something foreign. The sharp tensing of her face as the violinist plucked the strings furiously. The sporadic movements of the pianist as she hammered the keys in a frenzy. I felt both intimidated and enlightened. There was no possibility of dozing off with this kind of passionate sound.

That was when I first noticed him. His unshaven face tilted slightly to the right, his eyes closed. He sat slouched in his chair to the left of me, front row. He was probably the closest audience member to the performers. And it appeared he had fallen asleep. What audacity! Sure, it was easy to snooze to the classics of classical music I was accustomed to. But I wasn't sure this music could be categorized as classical. It had the ebb and flow of a boxing match: jab, jab, moment of calm, left uppercut, roundhouse. So I assumed the obvious. He must have had a long weekend; we all have those moments; we are only human. I returned my focus to the performers. The violinist dancing with her violin. The pianist as she snatched the next page of her musical notes with her left hand while her right tapped on without worry. Just as my attention began to stray from the music and to the surly squeak of the hardwood floor, the violinist slowly lowered her bow from her

instrument. I assumed that signaled the end of the piece. The array of clapping hands behind me confirmed my intuition. I glanced to my left and he was clapping, eyes open and hands a blur. I thought it was strange that the sharp staccato of notes couldn't wake him, but the sound of clapping could. Alas, the inconsistency of sound.

The violinist introduced her next piece. I expected her voice to match the pitch of the violin. To me, the violin in her arms defined her entirety. It was all I knew of her. I thought it would be like the pet owners who mimic their pets, violinist and violin as one and the same. But her eloquent voice was an octave deeper than the sound of her violin. As she spoke, she took a step to her side and away from the squeaky area of the floor. The pianist switched to a harpsichord. And the two began once again. He closed his eyes. And I thought nothing of it. I crossed my legs and straightened my back, fully aware that I would return to my typical slouch by the end of the song, like a dress shirt worn once, no longer as crisp as it was hanging in a plastic bag from the dry cleaners. I did my best to focus on the notes and how their individual sound formed a collective, a unified whole. The art of the craft and the science of the tone interlaced like strands of DNA, always being transcribed and duplicated. Until, about half way through the piece, there came a crescendo of notes. His head rose with the scale and his entire body lifted up from his slouched position in the chair. I caught this in my periphery but I could have been watching him, it was so clear. I had never seen someone move in such a way. His chin rose in perfect timing with each note, as if an invisible string yanked his head upward. He couldn't be sleeping! I shifted my body toward his direction and observed. His eyes were still closed and his body still slouched. But what then had I just seen? I was completely oblivious to the music now. Was he simply sleeping or was he simplifying the music to just sound with his closed eyes? His body was still, and remained still for the majority of the piece. Perhaps my peripheral vision was deceitful, I was probably imagining things— that crescendo must have been just a perfectly-timed twitch. As I was about to return my focus to the performers, his head jolted to the right and then swerved to the left. It was so deliberate that others in the audience must have seen it. I looked around in utter disbelief, yet their eyes were on the performers. And so these glancing observations turned into a game. Asleep or no? I had to know.

The piece ended and I was still unsure. He opened his eyes and clapped like he had before. Perhaps he was accustomed to clapping regardless of the nap he so desired. As the violinist continued with her routine, I dedicated myself to understanding him just as a detective would. I analyzed him from head to toe, searching for (or a lack of) hints of music fluency. His tennis shoes were at one time white but now a sort of yellowish-tan. It looked like they had been through at least a couple of winters here. There was nothing standout about his boot cut jeans, either. In fact, nothing really stood out about him. His sweater was plain. His slight facial hair was typical. His box-rimmed glasses with decently thick lenses were nothing out of the ordinary. I was expecting at least some style, at least a sliver of something to tie him to the music. But there was nothing. Normalcy was turning detective work into a critique of style.

His quirks continued throughout the performance. Eventually I returned my focus to the musicians. I was here for the music, not him and his eccentric movements. My periphery caught a glimpse of his twitches but I ignored them. Soon I began to mull over my own relationship with the music. Random thoughts became the ether between what I heard and what I felt. The memories

from my hometown occupied more space than the physical luggage I heaved across the country in three airports and a taxi or two. I thought about the hipster coffee shops back home and how the beautiful libraries here could never match the creative confidence that a foamy latte on a coarse wooden table inspired in me. Or the burn of pedaling my mountain bike up the steep trails in Sutro forest, and the exhilaration of bombing down those same, damp trails, a completely different challenge depending on the direction. I even thought about the house under construction along my daily walk to the bus stop. Standing on a water drain directly across the street from the house, I would take a picture of its development. In the first few weeks, the wooden structure came together as quickly as a flipped house in San Francisco. But as the walls blocked the inner framework, a black tarp was draped over the outside of the building. That was the last progress I saw for months before I left the city and ended up in the Carriage. My winding thoughts brought me back to the violin and piano, the sound different but the feeling the same.

The concert ended before nine o'clock. The violinist gave her final thanks to the crowd. There was a moment of pause as the audience ruminated in the nostalgia of the moment. I took one final glance at him as he gathered his things before I stood up and walked to the back of the room for complimentary bubbly. I hoped the aromatic alcohol would help numb the outside cold. As the champagne's carbonation tickled the back of my throat, I heard the squeak of worn tennis shoes on hardwood floor as he made his way out the door into the swirling abyss that awaited us all.