

*A Place for Hearing*

The chances are that it is a modern building, built since the Second World War. The last fifty years or so have seen a doubling of the number of professional symphony orchestras in the world, as the Western classical music tradition has moved into regions where it was previously unheard, and an explosion of concert hall building has taken place to house those orchestras and their performances. Countries and cities that wish to signal their entry into the "developed" world often do so through the construction of a "center for the performing arts," of which the centerpiece is a big concert hall, and through the establishment of a symphony orchestra to play there. In addition, many cities in the older industrial countries have decided that their existing nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century hall is too small, or insufficiently specialized, or that it projects an image that is not up to date and have commissioned replacements. So today modern concert halls greatly outnumber older ones.

As we approach the building, our first impression is likely to be of its great size. It is a landmark in the cityscape, and even its external appearance tells us that it was built with no expense spared, probably in the forefront of the design and building technology of its day. It stands most likely on a prominent site, on a rise perhaps, in a park, beside a river or harbor, or as the focal point of a complex of civic buildings. It is probably located slightly apart from the commercial center of the city, possibly surrounded by gardens and fountains, and at night it will almost certainly be floodlit. In the winter darkness it blazes with light inside and out, a beacon of culture in the philistine world of commerce that surrounds it, welcoming the initiated with dignity and discreet opulence but making no attempt to attract the vulgar with those flashing neon signs and brightly colored posters which one sees outside cinemas and other places of popular entertainment.

Every building, from the tiniest hut to the biggest airport terminal, is designed and built to house some aspect of human behavior and relationships, and its design reflects its builders' assumptions about that behavior and those relationships. Once built, it then has the power to impose those assumptions on what goes on within it. A conventional school building, for example, with its rows of boxlike classrooms joined by corridors, its assembly hall, its gymnasium and its staff room, is built in accordance with certain assumptions about what young people in our society ought to learn and how they ought to learn it. But it also enforces those assumptions, making difficulties for those who might have different ideas. Even so everyday a structure as a family house or apartment makes, and enforces, certain assumptions about family life and its relationships, about childhood, privacy, cleanliness and sex.

The scale of any building, and the attention that is paid to its design and appearance, tell us much about the social importance and status that is accorded to what goes on within it. The decline in the importance of rail transport is clearly mirrored in the modest appearance of most twentieth-century railroad stations in comparison with the splendor of those built in the great era of nineteenth-century railroad building, when the railroad signified a quantum leap in human mobility and speed of travel. Today their splendor has passed to airport terminals.

Some buildings lend themselves to uses, to the housing of sets of relationships, that were not foreseen by their builders. The great Victorian railway engineer Robert Stephenson could never have dreamed that the magnificent roundhouse he built for one of his new London terminals would in the 1960s begin a new life as a versatile performance space. Such new careers for buildings depend on their not having been designed too rigidly for their original function. For while some buildings leave room for a variety of activities and relationships, others impose their structure very firmly on what goes on within them.

Modern concert halls fall mainly into the latter category. They are highly specialized buildings, designed down to the last detail to house not just musical performances but performances of a very specific kind. The architects who design them, and the committees of civic authorities who commission and approve the designs, are for the most part members of the social group that tends to take part in such events. They know how people are supposed to behave there and will shape the building in ways that will encourage that behavior, at the same time closing off the possibility of behaviors of different kinds.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about this building may be that it is here at all. For musicking, even large-scale musicking, does not *need* a

building such as this. Human beings have been musicking for as long as there have been humans and have done so mainly without feeling the need for a specialized building to house their activities, certainly not for anything on so grand a scale as this, anything so opulent or so impressive. If the cathedrals and palaces that in Europe in earlier times were the scenes of many such performances were grand and opulent, it was not for the sake of the performances themselves but for the religious or aristocratic ceremonies of which the performances were no more than a part.

The grandeur of this building is something else, and it tells us loudly and clearly that the performances that take place here are an important social activity in their own right, not just as part of another ceremony or event. It tells us also that those who consider them important have the confidence and possess, or at least control, the wealth and the power to actualize that belief in architectural form.

If the idea of an event that consists entirely of a musical performance, with no other social function than playing and listening to music, is a modern one, so is the building that is built expressly to house such an event. The large purpose-built concert hall is essentially a nineteenth-century invention. Only a handful were built before the turn of the nineteenth century, and almost all were tiny by present-day standards. Even many of the big nineteenth-century halls that are now used from time to time for symphony concerts, like London's six-thousand-seat Royal Albert Hall, were intended, and are still used, as multipurpose places of assembly, symphony concerts taking place among balls, political rallies, boxing matches, and the like. These are the halls that, even though they may have served very well for symphonic performances for more than a hundred years, are now being replaced by more specialized buildings. This means that virtually all musical works composed before the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, and many later ones as well, are out of their original setting when they are played in a concert hall.

The architectural style of older concert halls, even those which have been built outside Europe, first in the Americas and later in more remote colonies such as my own country (Wellington built itself a fine one in Italian baroque style in 1904, barely sixty years after the first British settlers arrived in New Zealand), generally emphasizes a continuity with the past of European culture. It may be plain classic, exuberant baroque, Renaissance, or a mixture of these, so the building may remind us of a Greek or Roman temple, of an Italian Renaissance palace, a French château, or even, in the case of Barcelona's dazzling Palau de la Música Catalana, an art nouveau fantasy world straight out of the pages of William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (an appropriate evocation perhaps for a building that was built

for their own performances by a workers' choir in the early twentieth century, before socialism became a dirty word).

I cannot remember seeing a concert hall built in Gothic style, possibly because its association with a mystical, theocentric culture is felt to be out of place in the rational, humanistic world of classical music. Despite the widespread use of Gothic Revival in the nineteenth century for anything from railway stations to London's Houses of Parliament, neither of the two great Gothic Revival architects, Gilbert Scott in England and Viollet-le-Duc in France, ever got to build a Gothic concert hall.

The entrance facade is impressive (in older buildings a tall classical colonnade surmounted with a pediment like a Greek temple is a favorite device) and is intended to make entry into the building an event of importance. We pass through the doorway into a lobby with a row of ticket windows, the only visible sign in this big building of a link with the everyday world of commerce and money. We have had the foresight to pay in advance the money that entitles us to take part in the event, so, armed with the tickets that are the symbol of that entitlement, we walk past the windows, where a line of people is waiting to pay and be admitted.

At an inner door we show our tickets to an attendant who stands guard to ensure that only those entitled to do so will enter. He takes the tickets, returns the stubs that bear the numbers of the seats we have been allotted, and politely motions us on. Passing through the door, we find ourselves in a grand ceremonial space. Now we have entered another world, apart from that of our everyday life.

The space extends around us, lofty and sumptuous. If it is in an older building, it will most probably be formal and rectangular, matching in style the building's exterior, lit perhaps by big chandeliers and decorated with statuary and mirrors. In more recent halls, it may well be asymmetrical, with staircases rising in unexpected ways, ceiling sloping this way and that and even curved, with angled walls that trick the sense of perspective, all carried out with up-to-date skill and technological daring that is clearly intended to place the building and what goes on within it squarely within today's up-to-date technological culture.

There are bars for coffee, snacks and alcoholic drinks. On the walls and display stands there are posters, some advertising future concerts and others giving the entire schedule of performances for the season. There are glossy program booklets on sale or free distribution telling us about tonight's conductor and soloist, listing the pieces to be played, and giving such background information as is thought to be necessary for full appreciation of them. We buy a booklet and thumb through it, more interested at this moment perhaps in the crowd of people who, like ourselves, are waiting for

the concert to begin. There is a quiet buzz of conversation. Although there are chairs and tables, most people seem to prefer to stand and keep their ability to move around.

This, we know, is not the space where the performance is to take place but a transitional space through which we pass in the progression from the outer everyday world to the inner world of the performance. It is at first hard to understand why a mere transitional space should be so big and grand; it must have added considerably to the construction cost. Nevertheless, its spaciousness and grandeur tell us that it is an important part of the building, where an important part of the event takes place. It is a criticism I have heard made of the otherwise excellent church-turned-concert-hall, St. John's, Smith Square in London, that it has no transitional space between the outside world and the auditorium, even though it does have a place for socializing in the crypt. Traditionally, churches do not, of course, have foyers; those modern churches that do may speak of a change in the nature of the ceremonies that take place there.

The foyer is a place to eat and drink and socialize, to see and be seen. There is nothing wrong, of course, in wanting to socialize or to see and be seen; where we are seen to be, like where we are not seen to be, or seen *not* to be, is an important element in who we are. Musical performances of all kinds have always been events to which people go, at least in part, to see and be seen; it is part of the meaning of the event. In the ceremony that is to take place here, socializing and listening are kept strictly separate from each other and are allocated separate spaces.

A grand ceremonial space such as this imposes a mode of behavior on those who are unaccustomed to it. They become somewhat self-conscious, lowering their voices, muting their gestures, looking around them, bearing themselves in general more formally. They may even feel something like awe. But frequent concertgoers who are accustomed to the place cease to feel the need for such submissive behavior, and with it their demeanor changes. The muted gestures are replaced by gestures of body and voice that are not only relaxed but *signal* relaxation, gestures that say, in effect, to anyone who is watching and listening, *I am at ease in this place and with this occasion.*

One can observe similar patterns of behavior in other grand ceremonial buildings—a great church, for example, where it is the visiting unbeliever who creeps quietly around while the priest and the pious talk and joke unconstrainedly, or in a palace, an important government building or the headquarters of a big organization. All have their initiates and their outsiders, and from their behavior as they move around the building it is generally not too difficult to tell who are insiders and who outsiders, who are privy to its rituals and who are not.

It would not be stretching matters too far to call this building a sacred space. Certainly, it is the site of events that are of more than ordinary importance in the minds of those who built it and those who use it. In their minds those events need no justification; they ought to take place, and that is that. The impression of a sacred space is reinforced by witnessing the indignation of those classical music lovers who see their hall being let, perhaps by a management desperate for income in these straitened times of vanishing subsidies, for rock concerts and other kinds of events in which the rules of symphony concert decorum do not apply.

So in the foyer we take time out to assure ourselves that we are indeed present, that we belong in this place. Even if we have come alone and know nobody, we can still feel a part of the event as we buy a cup of coffee or an alcoholic drink and look around us as we sip. Among those present we might recognize celebrities—a famous violinist, the music critic of a quality newspaper, even perhaps an eminent politician. The latter may be taking cocktails with a group of expensively dressed men and women whom we can assume to be executives, and their wives, of the corporation that is sponsoring tonight's concert. They will be pleased that it is so well attended and will be occupying boxes or the two front rows. Their sponsorship, and their interest in being seen here tonight, give further confirmation that this is an event of importance in the modern world, not only, it seems, of high culture but also of commerce. All appear casually at home in this place. We remember our manners and do not stare.

A few minutes before the appointed starting time of the performance, a discreet electronic signal sounds to warn us that we should take our seats. The concert will start on time, and those who are not in their seats by then will, like the foolish virgins of the parable, find themselves shut out, at least until the end of the first piece. We mount the stairs and, following the instructions on the ticket stub, find our door and pass through into the auditorium itself.

If the entry to the foyer was impressive, that into the great inner space is dramatic. Now we have really crossed the threshold into another world, and that world opens up around and above us and envelops us. The very air feels different. Beneath the lofty ceiling sparkling with lights, row after curved row of seats separated by aisles extends across the raked floor, while above are galleries with more rows of seats. All face in the same direction, down the rake of the floor toward a raised platform at the end. This platform is itself tiered, and on it are seats facing the audience or, rather, facing concentrically toward a small dais at the front center of the platform. Behind the dais is a waist-high desk, and on it lies the score of the first piece to be played tonight, waiting for the conductor and the musicians who will

between them bring the piece into existence. It is this dais and desk that together form the focus, the center of attention, of this whole vast space.

Auditoriums vary greatly in shape and size, from symmetrical boxes with galleries along the sides and at the end, through fans, horseshoes, ellipses, and parabolas to free-form spaces with cascades of seats spilling down on all sides toward the musicians' platform. They range from the plain, austere and colorless to the riotously ornate and many-colored. They might incorporate, on the one hand, features of classical, baroque, or rococo architecture: columns and pilasters, swags, cornices and pediments and even caryatids, lunette windows high up, coved and vaulted ceilings, big ornate chandeliers and maybe allegorical fresco paintings or mosaics on the walls or ceiling, or on the other hand, the common stock of modern or postmodern architecture: daringly cantilevered balconies and boxes, tentlike ceiling, asymmetrical seating, curved or strangely angled walls, cunningly concealed or brutally visible lighting, sound reflectors hanging apparently unsupported above the platform, even perhaps jokey postmodernist references to the motifs of classical or vernacular architecture, like the square-mullioned windows, resembling those in a child's drawing of a house, that confront one in the auditorium of Dallas's postmodernist Meyerson Center. (It is not only the horseshoe shape of that auditorium that reminds one of a traditional opera house; the foyer, the place for seeing and being seen, is larger and grander than the auditorium itself, while the architecture of aristocratic privilege reappears unexpectedly in the row of boxes, each with its minute retiring room barely big enough to hang a mink coat, that forms the first tier of the balconies.)

Auditoriums may be lined with wood, with plaster, with colored hangings and sculpted panels, even perhaps, as a relic of the once-fashionable "new brutalism" of the 1960s, with raw concrete still bearing the imprint of the wooden shuttering into which it was poured, or any of these in combination. In general, discreet colors are favored: pastel, ocher or white for the plasterwork; the rich tones of natural wood; hangings in the colors of natural dyes; seats upholstered in deep red, slate blue or soft sea green, with aisle carpets in matching or tastefully contrasting colors.

What they all have in common is, first, that they convey an impression of opulence, even sumptuousness. There is wealth here, and the power that wealth brings. But on the other hand, there is a careful avoidance of any suggestion of vulgarity. What is to happen here is serious and important and will not appeal to the vulgar. Second, they allow no communication with the outside world. Performers and listeners alike are isolated here from the world of their everyday lives. Commonly, there are not even windows through which light from outside may enter. Nor does any sound

enter from that world, and none of the sounds that are made here will be allowed to escape out into it.

We take our allotted seats, which for tonight's concert are in the middle of a row between two aisles. When the other seats in the row are taken, we shall have to stay here for the duration of the performance; there will be no moving around. Since all the seats face in the same direction, we can talk only to our neighbors in the same row and, with more difficulty, to the person immediately behind or in front of us. If the foyer was a place for socializing, this is strictly a place for looking, listening and paying attention. It is indeed an auditorium, a place for hearing. The word itself tells us that hearing is the primary activity that takes place in it, and here indeed it is assumed that performing takes place only in order to make hearing possible.

The modern concert hall is built on the assumption that a musical performance is a system of one-way communication, from composer to listener through the medium of the performers. That being so, it is natural that the auditorium should be designed in such a way as to project to the listeners as strongly and as clearly as possible the sounds that the performers are making.

No large space, of course, can be without some sonic resonance, and over centuries musicians and listeners alike have come to accept, and eventually to feel the need for, a certain amount of resonance in the sound as an element in the communication. Those who composed for performance in the great and very resonant Gothic cathedrals wrote into their masses and motets an allowance for the enormously long time, sometimes several seconds, that it takes for each sound to die.

But concert music from the seventeenth century onward has been written with less resonant spaces in mind; the resonance must not be so strong or so prolonged as to blur the logic of the progression from one note or one chord to the next. Great care, even today as much intuitive as it is scientific, goes into the acoustic design of concert halls to give them enough resonance but not too much. Halls such as London's Royal Festival Hall that are found to be to insufficiently resonant may resort to discreet boosting of their resonance by using electronic delay circuits, but this last-resort use of modern technology is felt to be somehow out of place in the performance of symphonic music. It is felt somehow to be cheating, and it does not advertise its presence.

All other considerations are subordinated to the projection and reception of the sounds. In particular, care is taken so that listeners will not be disturbed by the presence of others as they listen. For this purpose the auditorium floor is raked to give uninterrupted sightlines, the audience is fixed in the seats and knows it is to keep still and quiet; the program booklet

politely asks us to suppress our coughing, and nobody enters or leaves during a performance. The very form of the auditorium tells us that the performance is aimed not at a community of interacting people but at a collection of individuals, strangers even, who happen to have come together to hear the musical works. We leave our sociability behind at the auditorium doors.

The auditorium's design not only discourages communication among members of the audience but also tells them that they are there to listen and not talk back. The performance is a spectacle for them to contemplate, and they have nothing to contribute to its course. Such occasions as the famous riotous premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in Paris in 1913, one of the last occasions in the history of the Western concert tradition when the audience talked back to the performers, are now well in the past. Today's concert audiences pride themselves on their good manners, on knowing their place and keeping quiet.

Nor does the design of the building allow any social contact between performers and listeners. It seems, in fact, designed expressly to keep them apart. It is not only that the orchestra musicians enter and leave the building by a separate door from the audience and remain out of sight when not actually playing, but also that the edge of the platform forms a social barrier that is for all practical purposes as impassable as a brick wall. Not even the wraparound design of certain modern auditoriums, such as Berlin's Philharmonie or Toronto's Roy Thompson Hall, can disguise the fact that a concert hall houses two separate groups of people who never meet. The technology of the concert hall has produced a gain in acoustic clarity, but that clarity is balanced by a loss of sociability. That, of course, is the way of technologies; none comes without its price. It seems that our contemporary classical music culture feels that the gain is worth the loss.

The great building, then, dramatizes and makes visible certain types of relationships. It isolates those within it from the world of their everyday lives, it brings some together and keeps others apart, it places some in a dominant position and others in a subordinate position, and it facilitates communication in one direction but not in the other. These relationships are not god-given but were brought into existence by human beings for reasons of which they may not even be conscious but which, I believe, model or enact ideal human relationships as those taking part imagine them to be. The relationships of the building are not, of course, the total meaning of the event, being only one strand of the immensely complex web of relationships that is the performance. But they do establish some general limits, or parameters, for those relationships which can be, and are, brought into existence every time a musical performance takes place there.

We can learn much about what *is* by considering what *is not*. A building for musicking that must surely have encouraged a different set of relationships was opened in London in 1742. Its interior was portrayed by Canaletto in a painting that hangs today in London's National Gallery. It was the Rotunda in Ranelagh Pleasure Gardens.

I have discussed pleasure gardens and their musicking in another book as a "feature of London's social and musical life . . . until well into the nineteenth century. They must have been agreeable places, to which admission could be gained for a modest charge, where the finest musicians of the day were pleased to appear and some of the best musicking could be enjoyed by all regardless of social class, not as a solemn ritual but as part of an enjoyable social scene which included eating, drinking, promenading, and, occasionally, watching fireworks. They catered to a public that was not at all selected in terms of social class, and the single public enjoyed a single repertory known to all—folk music, songs, operatic and orchestral music alike" (Small 1987).

The Rotunda at Ranelagh was a remarkable and beautiful building, the grandest music room in the two hundred or so pleasure gardens of eighteenth-century London. It could not be more unlike a modern concert hall. Canaletto's painting shows a big circular space three stories high and a 150 feet in diameter with, in the center, an enormous and ornate octagonal fireplace, open on all sides, whose chimney doubles as central support for the roof. In the whole big space there are no seats.

Warm sunlight pouring in through the second-story windows and an open door shows us at floor level a continuous row of tall arcaded niches; above them is a colonnaded gallery, and above that is a row of arched clerestory windows. Big candelabra of shining brass hang from the ceiling, with a smaller one in each ground-floor niche. It must have been a glittering scene at night. At each compass point there is a two-storied arched and pedimented doorway, one of which has been blocked off to make a canopied orchestra platform on which Canaletto shows us, not very distinctly, an orchestra playing. It might be Mr. Handel directing one of his organ concertos or a concerto grosso; or that remarkable phenomenon, the eight-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, presenting a piano concerto of his own composition; or the regular music director, Dr. Thomas Arne, directing his new symphony—they all performed there. Whatever it is they are playing, we can be sure it will be a piece that modern concert audiences sit in stillness and silence to listen to.

But that is not what the people in this picture are doing. They are standing or walking about, talking in pairs and in groups, or just coming and going, in much the same way as people do in the foyer of a modern concert

hall. It appears that the building has not caused socializing and enjoying music to be divided into two separate activities as does a modern concert hall, and the members of the audience seem to be perfectly capable of doing both things at the same time. We have to assume that they were no whit less sophisticated or discerning in their musical judgment than modern audiences, since this is the period, around 1760, that is generally regarded as one of the high points in the history of the Western tradition.

Most of those present seem, at least to our eyes, to be treating the performance as background to their other social activities—there is even in the foreground a couple of small boys engaged in a bout of fisticuffs—but there is a knot of people gathered around the musicians' platform, as in a later day jazz enthusiasts would gather around the bandstand in a dance hall when one of the great bands was playing for the dancing. If the musicians are part of the social scene and do not dominate it, it is to large extent because of the circular shape of the building, which allows no direction to be the dominant one. Even the musicians' platform is unobtrusive; it looks like the afterthought that we are told it was, since the musicians were originally placed at the center of the space. Another detail emphasizes what is to our eyes the informality of the scene: in the niches around the circumference can be seen diners seated at tables. In one niche I think I can even see a waiter bending over obsequiously, taking the order. It looks like a very agreeable scene.

As we listen today, in the concert hall or on record, to the early piano concerto of Mozart, the organ concerto or concerto grosso of Handel, or the symphony of Arne, we might recall that, while the patterns of sound we hear are more or less the same as the audience in Canaletto's painting was hearing, they are an element of an experience that is very different—not better, necessarily, or worse but different. That audience took from the performance what they wanted, and we take from it what we want. Like any other building, a concert hall is a social construction, designed and built by social beings in accordance with certain assumptions about desirable human behavior and relationships. These assumptions concern not only what takes place in the building but go deep into the nature of human relationships themselves.

See the Canaletto painting on the next page

