Darkness Invisible

Wendy Lesser

String Quartet No. 3
by Georg Friedrich Haas,
performed by the JACK Quartet.
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ON THE Sunday of Labor Day weekend, at a concert held at the Austrian Cultural Forum under the auspices of the Argento New Music Project, the adventurous and delightful JACK Quartet gave an unexpectedly dark performance. I mean this quite literally. The hundred or so people who had assembled to hear Georg Friedrich Haas's third string quartet sat in complete and total darkness for the entire concert. We were unable to see our hands before our faces, much less check our watches or glance at our companions or otherwise sense the presence in the room of anything but the strange, unsettling music that was emanating, strained note by strained note, from the four corners in which the musicians sat.

And we were thrilled to be there. For those of us who had followed the career of the JACK Quartet through recent performances in locales like Le Poisson Rouge and the Baryshnikov Arts Center, there was the certainty that these four young men—Christopher Otto and Ari Streisfeld on the violins, John Pickford Richards on the viola, and Kevin McFarland on the cello—would bring warmth and excitement to any piece of new music they chose to play. For others, there was the knowledge that Haas—an Austrian composer, born in 1953, who has already been much praised for his innovative work *in vain*—was capable of delivering something unusual and stirring, something that would combine music with a more overt kind of theatricality. And for all of us there was the pleasure of an extremely intimate concert that was both accessibly priced (requested donation: five dollars) and non-competitive (everyone who showed up got in, even those of us on the waiting list)—significant rarities in the hothouse world of New York music.

Once we had taken our seats, leaving vacant only the four black plastic chairs (one in each corner) that would eventually be occupied by the players, Argento's director, Michel Galante, got up to welcome us. He announced, among other things, that since we would be sitting in complete darkness for over an hour, he wanted to start by giving us a thirty-second sample of what this would feel like. He lowered the lights, and almost all survived it comfortably. (A single person left as soon as the lights came up.) But Galante urged us to keep our silenced cellphones handy in case anyone panicked in the darkness. "If you start to feel anxious during the concert," he said, "just say, 'Help!' and the people around you will pull out their cellphones and give you a little bit of light." This left me feeling torn for the duration of the concert: on the one hand, I wanted to experience the full score in uninterrupted silence; on the other, I was subversively eager to have the normal decorum of a concert hall broken by a sudden plea for help.

If you have never experienced complete darkness, you cannot really imagine what it is like. It's not just that you can't see at first, which is what happens when you wander into a darkened movie theater or go outside on a very dark night in the country. What happens in utter darkness is that your eyes never adapt at all. However long you sit there, the blackness remains impenetrable. And this in turn has other effects—psychological, physical, emotional—which can vary a great deal from person to person. The last time I experienced anything of this kind was in a Berlin restaurant called the *Unsicht Bar.* (You might ask why the Germans and the Austrians are particularly drawn to total darkness, but I think it's a question that probably answers itself.) Among our group of seven or eight diners at the restaurant, one or two obviously felt *very* uncomfortable, and made their discomfort audibly clear to the rest of us. I, on the contrary, found that not being able to see or be seen relaxed me. It was like being in a warm bath of nothingness, floating in one's own private world, and for the duration of that dinner, I thoroughly enjoyed the sensation.

That pleasant memory of the Unsicht Bar came back to me as I sat in the darkness of the Austrian Cultural Forum. In this case, though, there was not even the contact of other human voices or clattering cutlery or chomping teeth; the only detectable sounds came from the instruments. Haas's Quartet No. 3 is nobody's idea of a normal string quartet: it is more like a soundscape, or a series of aural inventions for strings. It is rarely unpleasant (though the noises are often harsh), but it never offers the sense of lift-off or propulsion that you get from more traditionally composed pieces. The music does not carry you along. Instead, it impinges on you as discrete sounds, elaborated by repetitions or variations of those sounds and punctuated by frequent brief silences. The piece is designed to be somewhat flexible: that is, the players—who of course are playing blind—are given some latitude in terms of how they follow the composer's instructions, and their performance can thus vary in length. (The JACK version lasts about seventy minutes.) And what you hear, in such a setting, will also depend partly on where you are sitting. Since I was directly in front of the violist, it seemed to me that he was the group's leader, while the cello seeped in more distantly from behind me and the violins emerged from two different locations off to my right. Had I been sitting elsewhere, I would no doubt have heard a different concert.

The quartet opens with a run of subdued, dully percussive, pizzicato-like notes, as if a small herd of mice were scurrying across the surface of a stringed instrument—a sound produced, I would guess, by fingers tapping their way quickly down the neck of the instrument. Later noises included the croak of a creaking door (the bow pressed hard against the string and pulled very slowly), the whisper of a rushing wind (horsehairs drawn across the very base of the strings, or perhaps even across the wooden part of the instrument), eerily high harmonics (the finger held so lightly on the bowed string that the note soars up to near-inaudibility), and brief episodes of the usual post-Bartók caterwauling and dissonance. Only at one point in the seventy-minute work did we get anything like a resolved chord, and that, it turned out, was an allusion to Gesualdo, the Renaissance composer whose Tenebrae setting apparently provided the quartet's obscure title ("In iij. Noct."), and whose influence was only audible—to me, at least—during those few brief moments of sustained harmony.

SITTING IN the dark at a concert is a way of being at once alone and in the company of others. As I explored my unusual and cherished feeling of privacy (stretching about in ways I would never do in a lit concert hall, yawning widely, tilting my head way back or lackadaisically from side to side, and repeatedly holding my hands in front of my face to see if they had become visible yet), I thought of D. W. Winnicott's notion about how the child

learns to be alone in the presence of its mother—that is, the baby gets to test out being solitary and accompanied at the same time. I imagined I was enjoying this childish sensation immensely, and yet on some level I must have felt a bit of fear or anxiety too, as I realized during one of my wild head-tilts, when I discovered that the room was not actually completely dark. There were two rows of very faint almost-lights barely visible in the ceiling, and another ghostly spot at the very back of the room—and this, strangely, filled me with the same kind of energetic hope that hostages in TV thrillers feel when they come upon a nail or some other sharp protrusion against which they can slowly fray away their binding ropes. But try as I might, I could not free myself from the darkness: I could never manage to see a thing, not even my pale hands waved directly in front of my face. Once, in a moment of casual listening such as one might do at a regular concert, I closed my eyes, and the shock when I opened them and perceived *no difference at all* was severe.

Seventy minutes might seem long, objectively, but you lose track of time when you are in the dark. As it happens, I had just that afternoon gone to an Ida Lupino movie at MoMA that lasted exactly seventy-six minutes, so I thought I had a very good sense of what that length of time felt like. But the movie and the concert seemed to occupy completely different time scales. The film (*Hard, Fast, and Beautiful*, from 1951—well worth seeing, by the way) was never boring, but it seemed to go on for a very long time. The Haas quartet had its tedious moments, but overall it seemed to go by very quickly: if I had not been told its actual length, I would have guessed that we had only been sitting in the concert hall for half an hour or less.

For most of its duration, the music seemed to be going nowhere in particular, but towards the end I could sense it coming to a conclusion. The pace and the volume both picked up significantly, after which—quite suddenly—the whole thing dropped to the pizzicato-like mouse-runs we had heard at the beginning. And then, finally, there was complete silence. I'd estimate that this lasted a minute or more (but again, it is hard to gauge time in the dark). Then the lights came up, and the squinting, blinking audience vigorously applauded the squinting, blinking, grinning performers. Was that last minute of silence a part of the score, or was it just us, failing to realize the piece was over? Hard to say.

As I listened to these four immensely talented players perform the Haas Quartet No. 3, I found myself wondering what it would be like to listen in complete darkness to the performance of a quartet I know well: Beethoven's op. 131, for instance. Would the familiarity of the music shield me, at least in part, from the strangeness of the setting? Or would the wrenching emotional quality of Beethoven's music intensify the sense of physical darkness? And what about a piece of new, as-yet-unheard music, but one that had more tonal melody than Haas's work—a new chamber work by Jörg Widmann, say, or David Bruce, or another of the younger composers less wedded than Haas to the rigors of the avant-garde? How would *that* come across in total darkness, with the musicians spread about the room? Suddenly I longed to hear everything in this way; total darkness began to seem the ideal environment for listening to just about anything. And yet, given the difficulties of setting up and enacting a performance like this, it's likely that I'll never in my life have another experience of this kind. In fact, I feel quite lucky to have had it even once.□

The Ear Opened Itself to Me

1.

My mother's brain tumor has taught me about the ear.
Not many websites have pictures that are not drawings.
Science is most clear in diagrams.

An acoustic neuroma grows as a mess on the eighth cranial nerve
that takes impulses from the middle and inner ear to the brain.

It is taken for granted that two nerves will be lost in the operation.
These communicate balance. The left side of the brain can manage
but it takes days to stop the spinning, takes months to walk well.

The last time I walked with her she was kicking her right foot out.

2.

I had imagined the nerves as one-boned spines. The one
photo I found showed them as raw meat. When I'm ripping
the fat off my chicken, because I have no good knives,
I often cut myself with my fingernails and think about
salmonella. I often tear the meat and in the torn meat,
columns, myofibrils, reveal how they reach out to each other.
That's how they resemble the nerves. How many parts
of the body resemble the muscles? The nerves are not
the color of muscles, but of candied ginger which I've seen
prettiest half dipped in white chocolate. But ginger makes
my tongue burn. My mother, I remember, sat across the table,
pulling air through a tight circle made with her lips, to see
how cold it felt. We couldn't explain it. Her tongue gone
numb. Soon her cheek. Soon the roof of her mouth.

3.

There is a forty percent chance that the nerve
that communicates hearing
will also be lost. This is based on the procedure
performed all over the country.
But just one man handles the last three hours
of the eight-hour act,
when the nerves are cleaned. No one has died,
he tells my mother,
for him. Now the possibility is a threshold.

4.

Sometimes
I think of sinking

my mother's temporal
bone in the sea

because it is the densest
bone in the body.

I could time how
long it takes

to get where I can't
pull it back.

5.

An ear infection is also known as an otitis media.
Bacteria gets trapped in the eustachian tube.
The middle ear swells and turns red with swelling.

Abnormalities of the cochlea cause deafness.
Abnormalities of the external ear are common.
There are ten parts: helix, scapha, tragus…

6.

The inner ear has a room, the utricle—
the name of a fruit, too, the world's smallest,
one-seeded, indehiscent. The size of a grain of salt,
I could hide it in a crack in my tooth. I could hide
my mother's acoustic neuroma under my tongue
and think of it as a seed. It could bloom
into a sound.

— *Sarah Blake*