**MUSIC**

**Darkness Invisible**

*Wendy Lesser*

**String Quartet No. 3**

by Georg Friedrich Haas, performed by the JACK Quartet.

New York, September 2010.

O N 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 companions or otherwise sense the presence in the room of anything but darkness.

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 sum—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 no doubt have heard a different 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 seated in the front of the violin, it seemed to me that he was the group’s leader, while the cello seemed to be behind me and the violins emerged from two different locations off to my right. Had I been sitting elsewhere, I would have no doubt heard a different concert.

The quartet opens with a run of sub-subsidiary themes, 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 enjoy-
ing 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 hap-
pens, 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 see-
ing, 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 particu-
lar, but towards the end I could sense it coming to a conclusion. The pace and the volume both picked up significant-
ly, 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 applaud-
ed the squinting, blinking, grimming 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 wonder-
ing 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 famil-

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 saltimellia. I often tear the meat and in the torn meat, columns, myotibrils, 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 in the color of muscles, but of candied ginger which I've seen that's how they resemble the nerves. How many parts of my mother's acoustic neuroma under my tongue I could hide it in a crack in my tooth. I could hide one-seeded, indehiscent. The size of a grain of salt, one-seeded, indehiscent. The size of a grain of salt, the name of a fruit, too, the world's smallest, 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.

3.
There is a forty percent chance that the nerve that communicates hearing will also be lost. This is based on the procedure when you are in the dark. 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