

Same to You, Martini

By Kyle Gann
The New York Philharmonic Audience

In the middle of Henry Brant's *Desert Forests* at Avery Fisher Hall May 27, a loud "Fuck you!" drew my attention from matters musical. It emanated from a portly sexagenarian in a suit a couple of rows away, and was directed toward my colleague Leighton Kerner, who, as it turned out, had asked the man to quit talking during the music. The man subsequently remained quiet until the piece was over, then got up and began harassing Leighton. Luckily for the anonymous belligerent, his wife and friends whisked him away quickly. Five more seconds, and he would have had 200 pounds of livid new-music critic in his face.

What Mr. Vodka Martini reminded me (I'll name the old fart after what he had probably had a few of before his wife made him put his back on and go out) was that I avoid the Philharmonic party for the same reason I stay out of certain bars: the people I'd run into there neither share nor respect my values, and are likely to provide me with unpleasant experiences. Martini was hardly alone. Half of the row behind me were talking and cracking jokes. I stared at them but forfeited the experiment of asking them to shut up. I might have found myself conducting an obscene chorus.

The concert was, after all, one of my most amazing orchestral ex-



periences ever: *Three Places in New England* next to *Sun-treader*, followed by Brant's work with the composer at the piano, trumpets and trombones in the balconies, and a woodwind choir way up in the back. Admirably, Kurt Masur conducted the program, rather than farming it out as most big-name conductors would have, and brought to it tremendous conviction and authenticity. But I think I'd as soon be challenged to fight in a bar as have a rare chance to hear *Sun-treader* marred by wise-crackers. And I can't hear the Philharmonic play a new work, no matter what the style or quality,

without the subscribers around me making it apparent—during the music—that they don't approve. (I have no objection to the grand old tradition of booing afterward.)

Had the Brooklyn Phil given that program at Brooklyn Academy of Music, I'd have no incident to report. BAM's glory is that it has nurtured New York's most vibrant, open-minded, and interested audience, the closest thing we have to the European kind. Europeans devour concerts and festivals the way Americans read a newspaper, not because every article is written with Proustian ele-

gance, but to find out what's going on and pick up an occasional item of personal interest. They don't feel that hearing a none too good piece is a waste of time, because they're not covering up a cultural inferiority complex. When a piece doesn't suit them, they shrug, complain, and wait for the next one.

When BAM's patrons walk out on a performance, they tiptoe discreetly, out of respect for the artists and listeners who may be enjoying it. The NY Phil's walkouts, observed en masse a few years ago at John Adams's *Harmonielehre*, rise with a weariness that exudes disgust, then march out slowly, gazing around with an expression that reads, "Look at those Bozoes putting up with this crap!"

Orchestra patrons take any non-famous name on a program as a safe target for the hostility attending their cultural anxiety. Martini probably thought the only bright spot about having to attend was that next morning at work he could pompously announce, "Ah yes, the wife and I went to the Philharmonic last night, heard Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (sic). What a piece!" Imagine his chagrin when he saw a program full of unknown names, and Americans at that. No snob value there. BAM, on the other hand, isn't a Historic Cultural Institution; you can't impress your friends by going there unless they're hip enough to have gone, too.

My generation marches under the banner of getting new music to a wider audience. I wave that banner at BAM, but at NY Phil concerts I quietly roll it up. People like Martini make it hard to argue against older, academic composers who write abstruse music because

they hold audiences in contempt. In the '50s, composers made music difficult specifically to withdraw it from the world of mass commerce, and that seems like a tragic mistake. But every artist has an agonizing decision as to how "mass" an audience to aim for. I don't know anyone whose ideal audience includes a common denominator as low as Martini and his chatterbox cohorts. Theoretically, a performance by the Philharmonic should be one of the peaks of a composer's career, but in terms of reaching respectful listeners with a responsible performance, you'd be better off with a piano solo at Roulette. The Philharmonic can't provide much more than an impressive résumé item.

The American Symphony Orchestra League is wasting a lot of energy recommending light shows, fireworks, video, to hold the interest of twerps like Martini. But there's no way to engage Martini short of having Brahms played by 80 naked 19-year-old babes. To gain new, interested, younger listeners, orchestras will have to brace themselves to sacrifice a lot of the old fogies who come for reasons of social snobbery rather than art. I'd like to assure the Philharmonic that for every Martini whose money they lose, they'll gain someone like my couple of dozen friends who, for this fantastic program, came to the Philharmonic for the first time in years. I don't know that it's true, and the marketing staff will be hard put to ascertain the audience's exact percentage of dispensable assholes. (Questionnaires may not do the trick.) Meanwhile, I'll be Downtown, where audiences are civilized.

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