

Extract from "Flute" by Richard Adeney

We played Brahms's Fourth Symphony with Koussevitsky, and how can I describe what it's like to play a principal wind part of a Brahms symphony with a great conductor? (Yes, he was a great conductor, in spite of my carping.) As a listener, I'm out of sympathy and unresponsive to Brahms. The rich sound and the repeated building to climaxes make me feel ill; but playing his symphonies was wildly intoxicating, surely so much better than merely sitting in the hall and passively listening.

Koussevitsky had many hours of rehearsal which were like the impatient drilling of stupid children, and the way he taught me in detail how to play the flute solo in the last movement of Brahms's Fourth, a passage which always put me into an out-of-the-body trance, stayed with me always, so that in all future performances I remembered what had been bullied and cajoled into me years before.

In a concert like that one with the Brahms symphony, when the whole orchestra is totally involved, I found that my concentration on what I was doing was so intense that everything else was obliterated. Every other activity that needs great concentration, such as a really good game of chess, a fierce argument, or reading an excellent and difficult book, all involve for me a less complete taking over of my mind than playing such a concert. There was a feeling of unusual vigour, for all one's resources were summoned up for this life high point. Sometimes the flute seemed not to be there any more and technical problems no longer existed; I, myself, with no barrier of an instrument, directly sang the music. All around, and, it seemed, inside me as well, there was the music; I was it, it was me. Varying my playing, sometimes blending, vibratoless, with the horns, sometimes dominating the other players for a few notes, then shrinking into the background under an oboe solo, singing out again at full force with my own sound resonating in my head, more vibrato here for a lush tune, straight sound again with the clarinet, and as quiet as possible in a final wind chord; all the time following every gesture of the conductor, for he's the centre of the world.

When in those trance-like states, as when playing the flute solo in Brahms's Fourth, I thought that my playing had been taken over by something outside of me and that I could therefore relax and watch with confidence while the technical difficulties were played without effort (riding a bicycle, you don't think how to do it; it was like that); or sometimes I felt I was directing my playing from outside my body, suspended above my head, or even maybe that someone in the audience was controlling me. Or I believed that a long-dead uncle was helping me (an uncle who had died young, years before I was born) and I was calmed by his imaginary presence. I kept all these phantoms to myself then, and now see them as curiosities from my past, no longer believing in their external validity. And it seems to me now that these experiences might possibly be appropriate for a pianist playing late Beethoven – but for someone merely tooting a flute in an orchestra, very eccentric.

These weird feelings usually followed the playing of music which needed extremely unnatural breathing; long holding of breath, extra deep breaths, quick gulps of air, too much oxygen. Over-breathing causes odd effects. But whatever the causes of these oddities of perception, I'd be ecstatically happy when they occurred, and afterwards I'd get a lot of praise from my colleagues for my unusually warm playing.

After the concert, the outside world is unreal, pallid and far away, and the only thing to do is to go to the pub and have a few beers with your mates, people still in tune with you.

Watching solo virtuosos, those who are ecstatically absorbed by their playing, I'd love to know what their private feelings are: are they of the same type as mine? Or even more bizarre? What goes on in the minds of those crazy-looking pianists, those closed-eyed, emotional violinists, those frantic over-the-top conductors? But, if they also have strange fantasies, it would be impossible to find out about them, for I expect they'd be as secretive as I was.