

A Composer Reflects on a Musical Protest

Critical Inquiry ("In the Moment" Blog)

September 11, 2011

Janice Misurell-Mitchell, composer and performer (flute and voice) ponders the recent demonstration at the Israeli Philharmonic's performance at the Royal Albert Hall in London. This blog begins with links to a couple of YouTube videos of the event.

Free Palestine Protest, London, 9/1/11 at the Royal Albert Hall

1 Beethoven statue, "Peace for Palestine", based on "Ode to Joy" sung in parts with piano

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vqEEh-9JP4&feature=related>

2 Shows protest outside, song inside, boos

(For other descriptions of the protest see the article in the NY Times:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/03/world/europe/03london.html?pagewanted=all>)

I am conflicted about this protest. On the one hand, in terms of performance I think it is a brilliant concept examining ways we may take power through sound. It is also a musical gesture with an updated Ivesian/Cagean sensibility. It exerts its power through its "noise" and disruptions (see Jacques Attali, *Noise*) but the "noise" appears both as unwanted sound and the beloved Beethoven, so the disruption is more painful as a result and may make some audience members angry. The protesters thus gain some power but provoke a reaction.

The protest is directed at the audience (the radio audience as well) and also at the Israelis on stage. There are members of both the audience and the musicians who support the views of the protesters; those who opposed them were the most vocal, booing at the protesters, yelling at them, and trying to throw them out. Zubin Metha concentrated on playing the music, as did the orchestra: that is generally what is expected of orchestral members. (A small echo Plato's "third class citizens"? or the priests who preserve and protect musical icons?)

I know also that despite my support of the Palestinian cause, I would not participate in such a protest; as a musician I cannot in good conscience do that: I could not disrupt their performance. But does this reify the performance structure, so that it could never be disrupted? Is it "wrong" because concerts have a sacred air about them and we shouldn't violate the sacred?

But remember also that the sacred, the spiritual, give people pleasure (think of St. Augustine). So if people are getting pleasure from a concert, does that mean that we can't interrupt it if we have something important to say? Does their pleasure take precedence over the need to demand that the Palestinians have justice? Is there something wrong with this picture?

So although I have difficulty with agreeing to participate, I am at the same time tremendously excited by the idea of creating musical/theatrical art pieces that replicate some of these events (Tania Bruguera in reverse). A bit like Orlando Gough's *Shouting Fence* (view on Youtube). The forces will be based in conflict situations and presented musically.

Janice Misurell-Mitchell, 9/7/11

Permalink: <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2011/09/11/a-composer-reflects-on-a-musical-protest/>