

New York Philharmonic (2009)

Transcript of radio piece by Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner on WLRH, Huntsville, AL USA

I went to opening night of the new season of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. Yes, I was there, in a premium seat, right on the aisle of row P -- for Lorin Maazel's final season, this time with his friend Sir James Galway and his gleaming, dancing flute -- in an imposing piece by someone named Ibert, who's not a household word, at least in Huntsville, Alabama: I was more impressed by the quick fingers Mr. Galway showed off than the beauty of the melody he played, but that may be just me. But they did offer an encore that even I recognized, from the opening flutter all the way to the end: "Flight of the Bumblebee," yes. That one I'd heard before.

The music, however, wasn't where it was, that gala evening. My son gets press tickets because he writes reviews for an e-site called Musicweb.com, just like he worked for a real newspaper; some others were probably there for the music -- not only Ibert, but also Tchaikovsky and Berlioz -- a little old gentleman sat next to me who could barely totter to his seat, held up by a woman only marginally more steady on her feet than he; from his appearance and manner, I guess he'd been coming there for many decades, and was pleased to be at another opening night.

My son estimates the tuxedo-ratio at about 30% of the men, and my eyes confirmed that guess; and the ladies -- la! -- how splendid! Fancy gowns, little black dresses a plenty, and ball room attire I haven't seen the like of since my high school senior prom. And I swear there was one woman -- yes, I saw her, with these very eye-bones -- who was channeling Scarlett O'Hara, and whose billowing dress (and matching billowing hat) were created from someone's colorful flowered curtains.

It came to me that we were seeing exactly the same phenomenon that we had the night before at Yankee Stadium, though the clientele of the two teeming crowds varied considerably; my admittedly amateur survey convinced me that Bruce and I were the only two people who had been present at both events, though that's probably a prejudiced comment. But in both cases, it was the "big picture" that folk were there for: you can see the ball game immeasurably better on TV than in person, with closeups of the batter's eye-brows and the fine print on his batting helmet; you can probably hear better music, I suppose, from a carefully engineered, repeatedly selected and discarded set of studio recordings than from the "live" performance, interrupted by humanity in the form of coughs and sneezes, and therefore uniquely imperfect. But in both cases it's not the performance but the panorama that makes it very special indeed. You just have to be there, right?

Houston Hodges has been a Presbyterian minister for over fifty years, still keeps his hand in at the Big Cove Presbyterian Church in the Hampton Cove area.