



“Music Hath Charms to Soothe the Savage Breast”

—William Congreve, *The Mourning Bride* (1697)

A Story of Concert Etiquette and Musical Conquest
by Jane Vial Jaffe

Morty Newfer’s thoughts raced as he slapped on a couple of handfuls of cologne. “A bit potent,” he thought, “but it’ll wear off.” “Cough drops in pocket . . . opera glasses . . . do I need a coat? . . . phone messages will have to wait.”

A few minutes later, screeching into a space that lay an ocean of cars away from his destination, he grabbed his flashlight from the glove compartment, pocketed the opera glasses—on loan from Moira whose ticket he was using that evening to hear a symphony orchestra for his first time—and sprinted toward the building he’d driven by many times.

A black-suited individual was just closing the door as he darted up the steps, fumbling in his pocket. “Bother,” he grumbled. “My ticket’s right on the desk at home,” he panted to the ticket taker.

“See if they can help you at the box office,” she said, smiling. “The first piece has already started, so you can’t be seated until it’s over anyway.”

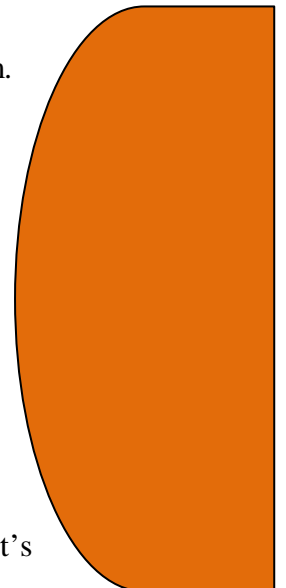
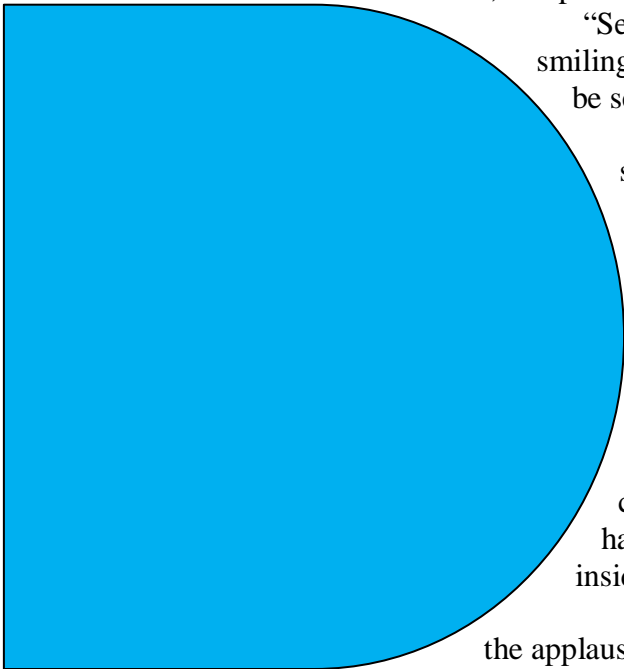
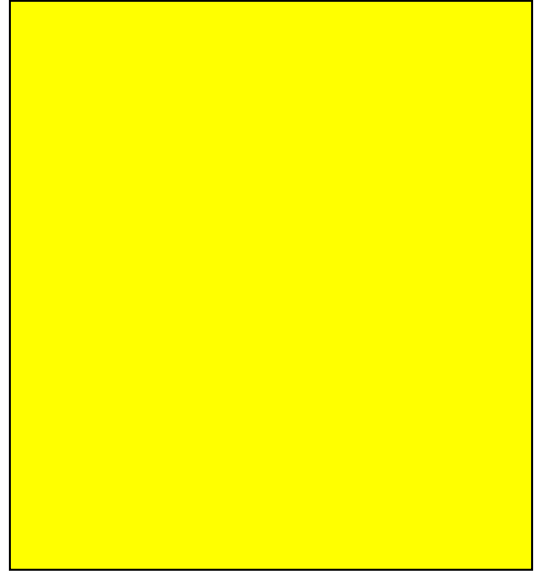
Proudly bearing a replacement for Moira’s season ticket, Morty handed it over and dashed in the direction the ticket taker was pointing, taking the balcony stairs three at a time. “Shhhh,” mouthed the usher, finger to her lips, “You can go in at the break.”

Morty leafed through the program the usher had handed him. “Ber-li-oz,” he read as crashing chords resounded through the closed doors. He wished he could have gotten the full effect from inside.

“Follow me,” said the usher when the applause rang out.

“Sorry . . . pardon me . . . sorry,” Morty mumbled as he tripped over six pairs of knees.

As he settled himself in his seat, juggling his flashlight, opera glasses, program, and coat, he noticed a child in the row ahead pinching his nose closed with his fingers. A few heads bent toward one another in whispered conversation and several nearby patrons got up to leave. “That’s funny,” he mused, “the concert’s



not over.” A moment later it dawned on him, “I guess my cologne didn’t wear off much.”

His attention was caught by a few stage hands adjusting some chairs and music stands on the stage, then the player just left of center stood up. “Violinist,” thought Morty, proudly identifying the man’s instrument. Someone played a note, the others tried to match it, and the violinist sat down. After a few moments of silence, an elegantly garbed woman walked on stage, bearing what looked like an enormous violin with a metal stick coming out of the bottom. She was followed by a man in tails. “The conductor,” Morty thought, pleased to have noticed the

man’s baton. He quickly joined the applause.

“*Schelomo*,” he read in his program, as the man two seats over stared fixedly at his flashlight. “I’d better read this later,” he thought, switching off the light.

As glorious sounds enveloped him, the audience gradually receded and a vague memory of his grandmother humming something melancholy tugged at the edge of his mind. Suddenly the air was rent by a shrill electronic tune. The woman on stage exchanged a glance with the conductor, but kept playing. Everyone in the balcony began to look in Morty’s direction. “It can’t be,” he panicked, diving into his pocket. The whole first phrase of what Moira had told him was Beethoven’s *Für Elise* had rung out by the time he could hit the “off” button on his cell phone. He sank as low as he could in his seat as heads swiveled back toward the stage.

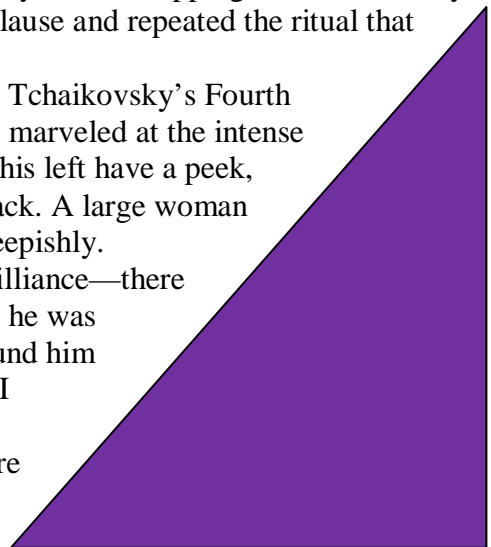
Eventually the music took hold of him again. He noted a feeling of regret when the conductor put his hands down and the audience began to applaud. He wanted the music to go on and on.

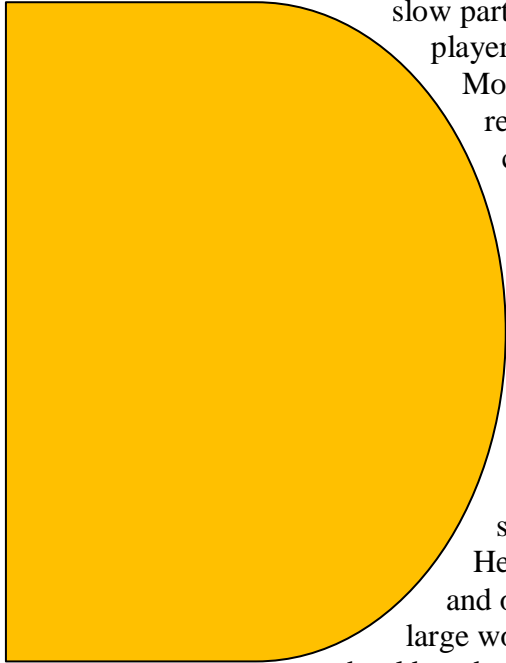
After trying to counteract his cologne with a little soap and water during intermission, Morty found himself with a little time to catch up on reading his program. “Oh . . . that soulful instrument was a cello.” Just then the pleasant jumble of tootling and sawing ceased on stage and the violinist, the one who had stood up before, entered. “Why are we clapping for him?” Morty wondered to himself as the violinist acknowledged the applause and repeated the ritual that had preceded *Schelomo*.

Morty’s heart pounded with the fanfares that began Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony. He took a long look with the opera glasses and marveled at the intense concentration on the players’ faces. He let the teenager on his left have a peek, too. “Great stuff,” he whispered as the boy handed them back. A large woman in the row ahead turned and frowned at him. He smiled sheepishly.

The music was winding up with great speed and brilliance—there was a moment of silence—then Morty was clapping for all he was worth. He broke off mid-clap as he noticed that others around him were not applauding. “Didn’t they like it?” he wondered. “I thought it was so great.”

The conductor started up again, this time much more slowly. After quite a while Morty recognized the same lovely, quiet tune he’d heard many times throughout this





slow part, now played by a long, tube-shaped instrument that the player was holding slightly to the right of his knee. "Oh no," Morty realized with horror, "I've just gotta cough." Face reddening, he reached into his pocket and came up with a cough drop, but at the same time a few coins tumbled from his pocket and crashed onto the floor, making enough noise for several hub cabs. The large woman turned to glare again as one of the coins rolled a few feet away, began circling on its edge, and finally settled with one deafening clink. "At least I didn't cough," he thought.

He carefully refrained from clapping as this quiet second part seemed to end, and was thoroughly enjoying the light, plucking sounds coming from the strings in the next part when the cough managed to escape. He tried muffling it with his sleeve. His program, flashlight, and opera glasses hit the floor resoundingly. He could see the large woman making an impatient gesture with her head and shoulders, but she didn't turn around.

The cough drop was still in his hand. Slowly and carefully he began to unwrap it. CRACKLE! He stopped and tried again. CRACKLE, CRACKLE! Better do it all at once. CRACKLE, CRACKLE, CRACKLE, CRACKLE! This time she turned around and angrily put her forefinger to her lips.

"Sorry," he mouthed.

The conductor went right from the delicate ending of the third part into a dramatic gesture that incited the whole orchestra to furious activity. "Wow!" he thought, "This is incredible!"

Morty could scarcely contain himself when the orchestra let loose its final chords. He was relieved to find everyone else clapping enthusiastically. He leapt to his feet and even yelled a few "Bravos" for good measure.

When he finally made his way to where he had parked his car, it was nowhere to be seen. He walked up and down the row, then fanned out to other rows. No trace. "Great. My car's been stolen." He walked over to where he saw a lighted sign, turned on his cell phone, and began dialing.

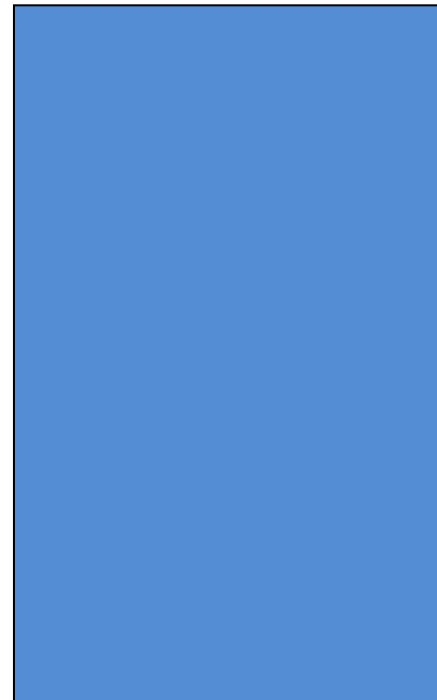
"Where did you park it?" asked the security officer who had driven up.

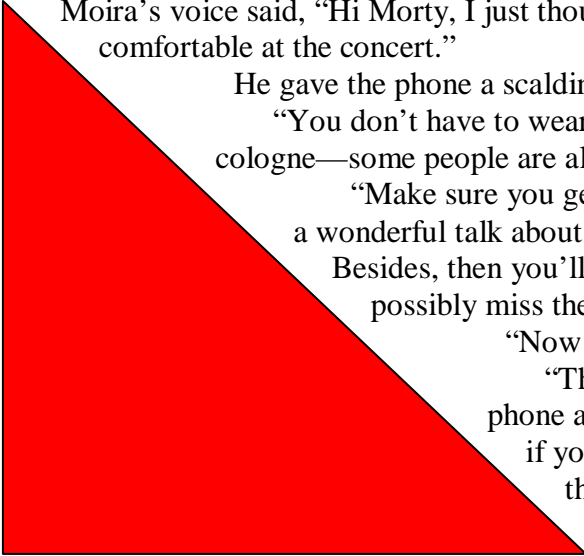
"Over there," he pointed. "Or was it there?" he mumbled.

"Hop in. Let's go look," said the officer.

Many minutes later, Morty and his car were reunited.

When he got home he flung himself onto his bed and pushed the "Play" button on his answering machine.





Moira's voice said, "Hi Morty, I just thought I'd call and tell you a few things, so you'll feel comfortable at the concert."

He gave the phone a scolding look.

"You don't have to wear a tie, but many people will. Don't wear any cologne—some people are allergic and you'll all be sitting pretty close together.

"Make sure you get there early. If you get there by 7:00 you can hear a wonderful talk about the music and you'll get a great parking place.

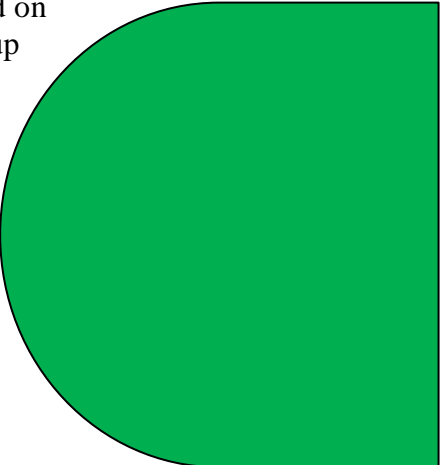
Besides, then you'll have time to read your program and you can't possibly miss the first piece.

"Now she tells me," he muttered.

"This is really important, Morty. . . . Turn off your cell phone and your watch alarm before you go in! And Morty, if you have to cough, try to stifle it until a loud part in the music. Take some cough drops that don't have crinkly wrappings or unwrap one ahead of time.

"Clap for the concertmaster when he

comes on stage; he's a kind of second-in-command who'll tune the orchestra before each piece. He'll probably already be on the stage for the second piece so you don't have to clap that time when he gets up to tune. Also clap for the soloist and the conductor when they enter. Don't clap in between movements—those are the sections of the piece listed on your program beneath the title. People used to do it all the time up until about the 1930s. Before then composers and performers liked it and would even play a movement over again, right on the spot. But then they got all worked up about the unity of the whole piece and customs changed. Still, there isn't a performer out there who doesn't like applause, so if you really want to, I guess you can clap, but people in the audience will glare at you. At the end of the piece, try not to clap until the conductor puts his hands down. You might spoil the mood, or worse, the piece might not really be over and everyone will turn and look at you.



"Oh, and don't forget your ticket. I left it on your desk."

Just then the phone rang. "Did you like it?" Moira asked excitedly.

Suddenly all the evening's mishaps evaporated from his mind as he realized that the lovely tune from the Tchaikovsky was still playing in his head. He started humming it to Moira. "Hey," he started eagerly, "What was the instrument played that tune near the end of the slow . . . uh . . . *movement*?"

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For a more standard description of concert etiquette visit www.sacphil.org, click "How to Prepare," and click "Frequently Asked Questions."

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