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**MUSIC VIEW**

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# Art Is Long and Seems to Be Growing More So Every Day

**L**ately I have been thinking long thoughts about length. I am talking specifically about the duration of musical performances nowadays, but also of performances in general. The truth pro- claimed from many a procession arch, that art is long, becomes more evident daily. And so the audience, or at any rate the part of it that comes in contact with the seats, has had to adapt. In fact, it is my deep-down conviction that we who incessantly attend artistic events are tougher, au fond, than our immediate ancestors. When it comes to long-term sitting, we are developing a master race.

It may be, however, that music audiences still lag behind those of other arts in this area. The movies may be at the leading edge in audience testing. I was struck with wonder and admiration to read Vincent Canby's account in this section last week of sitting through Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 15½-hour film, "Berlin Alexanderplatz" (in two chunks, of 7½ and 8 hours). Our sturdy critic not only endured but came away convinced that he had seen a great film in the way that it should be seen. If critics have become so dauntless and indomitable, isn't it likely that film audiences also have been developing staying power? And why not music audiences? Music listeners are not justasit is. I feel certain that the 1½-hour two-act opera is just around the corner.

One obvious piece of evidence in support of this opinion is the revival of popular interest in Wagner's "Ring," which according to vulgar legend is music's ultimate test of audience endurance. In fact, the "Ring" is not the monster it is made out to be. It consists of about 15 hours of actual music spread out over four performances that are rarely given on consecutive evenings. The intermissions can add a touch of sedition, but a decently produced "Ring" may not really seem long at all but merely unburied.

The illusion of sublime length also has been promoted as a selling point for marathon concerts, those a day, nonstop affairs devoted to the memory of Bach, B. Bart, Schubert or some other immortal. The proliferation of these concerts in recent years indicates that audiences take satisfaction in pitting their sitting talents against the best — and the most — that the great composers can throw at them. To be sure, there is a measure of cheating in these events since both the audience and the players slip in and out as whim or the program may dictate. With only the composer being present at all times. However, the underlying idea, specified in the name marathon itself, is to put on a show of endurance. Part of the appeal for the audience is the satisfaction of having mortified the flesh in behalf of a departed hero.

On the lookout, as I always am, for facts to support unshakable prejudices, I noticed recently that Gary Goldschneider, a pianist who obviously keeps his ear to the ground, gave a 12-hour recital consisting of all 32 Beethoven sonatas. Convincing, as he put it, that "our times demand something different from the standard recital length." Mr. Goldschneider plans to explore the same idea further, with programs of all 17 Mozart sonatas and of both books of Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier." His plans reminded me of one of the pioneers of the marathon idea, an English musician who took over the 24

Street Y a few years back for an all-day examination and elucidation of American piano music. I checked in for only part of the session, but I remember thinking afterward that I had heard one long piece by no composer in particular.

There you have one of the dangers in stretching the listener's endurance. Concentration flags, consciousness comes and goes. Sate was one of the first moderns to recognize this phenomenon and try to capitalize on it, writing music that he hoped would be experienced as background, in the way we experience wallpaper or furniture. I was not present in 1983, unfortunately, when a platoon of nine dedicated pianists under John Cage's command performed Satie's "Vexations" in New York. But there we had the dawning of a new era in audience testing. When the last note of the work, which consists of a single 86-second piece repeated 840 times, died away, one listener is said to have cried out: "Encore!" and he may even have meant it.

Every musician knows and every listener quickly comes to understand that musical time cannot be measured in the same way as ordinary sidereal time. Each work invents its own version of the clock and forces us to accept its measurements, contingent to some extent on the quality of the performance it receives. A mediocre performance of a short opera such as "Pagliacci" can last forever whereas a superlatively sung and acted "Coi-

Fan Tulle" can be over before you know it. Length, pure and simple, is no measure of quality or the potential for boredom.

But it can become a factor. Only the other day, in Houston, Leonard Bernstein offered us an opera called "A Quiet Place," which consisted of a single two-hour domestic drama played as a sequel to his earlier "Trouble in Tahiti." Even though the new work was enlivened by such time-honored ingredients of drama, as homosexuality, bisexuality, incest and pedophilia, it did not engage my interest enthusiastically. Despite patches of skillful music composed in Mr. Bernstein's most serious style, the opera proved to be hardly more than a series of psychoanalytical clichés and shallow homilies about the redemptive power of love. Around the hour-and-three-quarters mark I perked up, however, realizing that the composer could be on the way to take his place with Wagner, at least in terms of the clock. But no. "A Quiet Place" fell shy by some 20 minutes of matching "Das Rheingold" in the one-act-opera category, a keen disappointment for the connoisseur of musical languages. As it played in Houston, in fact, "A Quiet Place" was scarcely longer than the last act of "Gottterdammerung."

What I am really waiting for — and I hope you are, too — is a New York performance of Karlheinz (Stamp) Sorbji's complete "Opus Claycombballisticum," the three-hour work that is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the longest nonrepeating piano piece ever written. Just thinking about it three-hour piano piece gives me cramps, but what Sorbji I have heard, mostly from his favorite pianist, Michael Haberman. I remember like it Mr. Haberman should ever decide that the New York audience and critics are tough enough for the challenge. I would welcome the opportunity to show what I am made of. Calluses, mostly. ■