



essay

Together We Make a Shrine of This Place

by Pamela Hill Nettleton

I don't like group sensory experiences, as a rule. I'm a nice Minnesota girl who wants her solitude during moments of extreme... well, extreme anything. If I must feel something intense, I'll do it in the privacy of my own home, thank you very much.

I don't cry in front of the neighbors, I don't sigh in front of the kids, I don't emote in front of the cats. During sad, romantic movies I tell my husband I need emergency popcorn just so I can go off and sniffle unobserved. I feel better when I do my feeling behind closed doors.

Except for Friday nights, the magic of music, and what happens when we all sit down together to listen to it.

We arrange ourselves in tidy rows as though there are no differences between us, though we drive Mercedes and Mercurys, eat tofu and foie gras, speak Russian and Swahili, remember 1943 vividly and think swing was invented in 1998. We snuggle in, elbow to elbow, and agree without discussion that what happens in Orchestra Hall stays in Orchestra Hall. And then, before us, our hearts are laid bare.

The baton lifts and falls and the bows rise and grip the strings and the great bells of the horns raise up and somewhere in the cacophony of all that we feel in a lifetime some sense is made, some order found, and where we were only hearing, now we are feeling, too, and there we are, revealed, exposed, emancipated, and undone. We can no longer hide.

The music builds a cathedral that is a temple and a mosque where Latin hymns and Orthodox chants and ancient folk songs all sound like one thing, they sing of one thing, they sing one thing. The music is from a time but it travels, and with it we are born in Poland, live in Hämeenlinna, revolt in Russia, die in Germany, are reborn in Valhalla. We can know nothing about a people, a place, a history, yet when we hear the music our knowing is more wrenching than the truth itself. We can know nothing about our fellow travelers, those who take this journey with us, sitting silent in a row. Yet the music draws a tender bead and, sly thing, finds its way, winds its way through the cautious caverns of all hearts in the room, and we are taught that we are not the only ones with love newfound, with love forgotten, with love regretted, and now we know each other.

Left to ourselves, we would feel what we feel in isolation, behind closed doors, but we have been made a gift of this thing, this sound, this noise of hearts. We none of us look a stranger in the eye and ask to see his soul. Yet when you sit there and I sit here, we make a shrine of this place.

Pamela Hill Nettleton writes books, plays, magazine articles, newspaper essays, and libretti. Her most recent book, Getting Married When It's Not Your First Time, is published by Quill/HarperCollins. Nettleton teaches magazine writing at the University of Minnesota School of Journalism and writes locally for Mpls.St.Paul Magazine. She is married to Acting Associate Principal Bass William Schrickel.