

Found Sounds

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I

The Museo del Belles Artes in Mexico City is one of the classic examples of architecture of the Art Deco period, lavishly constructed from marble, limestone, copper, glass, bronze and brass. With a massive interior vestibule topped by a copper dome, balconies project from the marble staircase and form the entrances to a series of large rooms. Once the centre of cultural life in the city, the ageing building is pensioned off into providing recital space for virtuosos and allowing native painters to display their appallingly derivative work. Remarkably, several murals by Rivera and Orozco survive in splendour alongside these decadent façades. The place is hushed; should someone cough, the sound reverberates around the interior.

Suddenly from outside, a flash, and moments later, a crack of thunder. Torrential rain beats on the copper and glass dome in a fusillade of percussion. The doors at the entrance swing and slam as the pedestrians rush for shelter. Squeals, shouts and stamping feet reach up from the base of the buildings as the tumult continues above. Museum attendants are observed carrying metal buckets up the stairs to the upper floor. They place them, apparently randomly, around the floor area and retreat in conceited confidence. The fury of the storm soon relents and reduces to a steady downpour. The first drop hits the bottom of a bucket; then the next hits another, then the next, then another, then another, then another as the rain begins to seep through the glass and copper dome with accelerating rapidity.

As the noise of the rain begins to recede, the sounds from the ensemble of unattended buckets begin to crescendo, creating complex rhythms as each bucket's respective drip speeds up and slows down according to the size of the hole in the roof. Before long, the tone and reverberance emitting from each bucket alters as it fills with water which in turn alters the sound of the recital as it echoes around the building.

The rain gradually dies away and the sun streams through the windows; sometime later, not long after the last drip has landed, the attendants remove the filled buckets.

II

In the lush panelled concert hall of a provincial university, an ensemble of five brass-playing musicians in a relaxed and highly confident manner perform a repertoire of works, displaying in their professional manner the standards of excellence to which brass-players can aspire, if in doing so, their capabilities excel the qualities of the pieces selected.

As they played, something else could be heard from an indistinct distance. By turning the ear one way, it sounded as if one of the light fittings in the high ceiling was vibrating in (or out) of sympathy with a particular pitch of note. By turning the ear another way, it was as if a small insect was about to burrow into the recesses of the auditory organ itself.

This continued for several, short pieces of music, by the end of which the ear, the eye and the brain had in co-ordination explored every possible corner of the concert hall for a clue to this random accompaniment. Perhaps the fabric of the building itself was resonating in sympathy with certain notes? Images of the brass-outside-the-walls-of-jericho myth began to expand the possibilities of the music, beyond the walls that enclosed it.

Applause marked a break in the programme and the leader of the group stepped forward to introduce the next section. Suddenly, whilst he talked, there was the sound again. From outside the building? The corridor? No, there on the stage was the culprit. The euphonium player was making some quiet alteration to the tuning of his instrument and as he did so, the sound of his tongue rasping in the fluted sides of the mouthpiece was reflected off one of the ceiling panels and heard as if only a few metres away.

Evidently, none of the rest of the audience were in the reflection zone and as the leader continued to speak, it was only one pair of ears which heard the sound of his voice superimposed with small, sporadic but perfectly clear and exclamatory raspberries...