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Opening Extract from...

Shadows of Sounds

Written by Alex Gray

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~ Even the quietest of nights
are never silent: hear
their shadows of sounds.

From ‘Sounds and Silences’
by Norman MacCaig

Overture

The man at the back of the Upper Circle sat gnawing his fingernails and concentrating on the unbroken shadow cast by the proscenium.

Nothing could go wrong, surely. He'd thought of everything. All the details had been double-checked. The musicians who were only coming on for the second half knew exactly when to be on stage. It had been made quite clear during the rehearsal that there would be no sloping off to the bar until after the performance. The Orchestra Manager had driven home that point.

So why the hell hadn't the lights in the Concert Hall been dimmed? The programme was already ten minutes late in starting. He bit a flake of skin from his index finger. It was hard and waxy between his teeth. With an effort of will the man wrenched his gaze from the wings to the musicians on stage, as if trying to make sense of the delay.

On the platform the members of the Orchestra were looking bored. They had already tuned their instruments and were only waiting for the Leader to come on to start the evening's proceedings. Had this been a rehearsal, he knew from experience that the Sunday papers would be spread across their music stands. However, protocol dictated that they assumed an air of gravity towards the actual performance. As his eyes travelled over the players, he saw that the brass section weren't even attempting to hide their feelings. Typical, he thought.

One French horn player was slouched back in his seat whilst the trumpets at desks three and four were

deliberately outdoing one another with exaggerated yawns. They totally ignored the dark looks being fired at them by the Second Fiddle.

Only the Chorus sat silently up in the Choir Stalls, music folders open on their laps, ready to begin. From their vantage point above them, the man imagined the members of the Chorus looking down at the paying customers who'd be examining their watches and frowning towards the wings from where the Leader should have emerged. He looked at his own watch. It was almost a quarter to eight.

A hum of talk out in the auditorium became a ripple as the Orchestra Manager slipped onto the platform and bent to whisper to the Second Violin, a lady in black lace. She paused for a moment as if to reflect on his message, merely giving a quiet nod in reply.

A swift smile passed across her face as she performed her duty as Leader of the Orchestra, standing up and bowing to the audience. The brass section sat up just as Victor Poliakovski, the Russian conductor, came striding on to the platform.

The man sank back into his seat, took out a large handkerchief and wiped the perspiration that had gathered on his brow. "Thank God," he whispered to himself.

The house lights dimmed at last then, as the Conductor raised his baton, the first drum roll began.

Chapter One

It was business as usual backstage in Glasgow Royal Concert Hall. Now that the wings were cleared of the musicians, there was an obligatory pause in proceedings before the Leader would make his appearance. Tonight, however, that pause seemed unusually prolonged.

"Old George is keeping them waiting again," remarked the Stage Manager to the lanky youth beside him. From his cubicle in the wings he could see the Orchestra on his television monitor; a glance to the left would alert him to any performers arriving from their dressing rooms backstage. The remark might have been intended for the retreating figure of Brendan Phillips, the Orchestra Manager, who was responsible for escorting the Principals to and from their dressing rooms. He gave no sign of having heard the Stage Manager's words, however, as he walked briskly around the corner and out of sight.

"Not wanting to come out to play tonight?" joked the boy who was staring at the empty area behind them.

"Oh, he'll be here all right. Brendan will chase him up, don't you worry," the Stage Manager replied confidently, knowing that Brendan Phillips had disappeared off in the direction of the Artistes' corridor to fetch George Millar. The boy gave a sudden grin and sloped off after Phillips.

"Making you run around after them tonight, eh?" The boy's question made the Orchestra Manager break his stride for just a moment. Colin, the newest recruit amongst the Orchestra's drivers and shifters, was ever eager to fraternise with the Names as he called them.

Phillips had tolerated the lad's star-struck behaviour but it was becoming a bit of a nuisance. All the other shifters were downstairs in dressing room 1, where they could drink tea and smoke to their heart's content, no doubt listening to the football on the radio. He pretended to ignore the boy who had latched on to him, continuing along the corridor to the four rooms named after Scottish Lochs that were reserved for guest artistes and management.

Brendan Phillips stopped outside Morar, the second-best dressing room that, tonight, was occupied by the Leader of the Orchestra. Their guest conductor, Victor Poliakovski, would be pacing up and down next door in Lomond, the suite kept for the biggest name.

Phillips was agitated. Normally he would have closed the door stage left after the final musician had trooped out of the wings. Then it was only a short stride to the dressing rooms to alert the Leader. But tonight everything seemed to have gone wrong. He'd spent time dashing back and forth behind the scenes. First it had been a spare reed for a clarinettist who was temping, then a new set of music for the harpist. She had been sitting stage right making frantic gestures at him until he'd translated her sign language into a plea to fill her empty music stand. So he had been later than usual, forced as he was to go all the way round from the Stage Manager's cubicle to alert the Leader.

Colin, hovering behind him, was an irritant that Phillips could quite do without, yet the Orchestra Manager's desire to maintain an air of composure overcame his annoyance.

Phillips knocked politely, his knuckles light on the blonde wood of the door. There was no response. The Orchestra Manager gave a rat-a-tat that was intended to sound peremptory.

"Maybe he's in the loo," suggested Colin who was still hovering at Phillips's shoulder.

Brendan Phillips didn't deign to answer but twin creases between his brows revealed a growing anxiety. It was his head that would roll if there were a glitch in the proceedings.

The Orchestra Manager turned the handle and stepped into the dressing room.

At first the room appeared to be empty. Only the violin nestling in its open case gave any sign of the musician's presence. Brendan scanned the room before taking a further step inside.

Then he saw him.

Even though he was lying face down, the Orchestra Manager knew it was George Millar, Leader of The City of Glasgow Orchestra.

Brendan was aware of a gagging noise behind him but he couldn't move. Nor could he take his eyes off the body. Half of George's balding skull shone from the overhead light in the bathroom. The rest was a blackened mass.

Blood from a head wound had dripped onto the blue bathroom tiles creating a dark stain that had spread all the way down, reddening the man's grizzled beard. Brendan could see the tip of his wing collar sticking up like a bright scarlet flag.

In those first moments all the Orchestra Manager could do was stand and stare at the outrage before him.

His mind tried to deceive his eyes. Perhaps he'd slipped? Brendan attempted to visualise George's black shoes sliding on a wet patch.

He began feverishly scanning the bathroom floor for surface water. The tiles gleamed back at him, dry and polished but for that red halo emanating from George's head. He found himself blinking hard as if to dispel the vision of the body spreadeagled upon the floor. Even as his mind sought for a decent explanation, his eyes couldn't ignore the obvious.

No slip on the shiny tiles had accounted for George's sudden demise. Beside the violinist's outstretched fingers lay a metal hammer. Brendan recognised it at once. It was a percussion hammer, small, but not insignificant.

"My God, I don't like the look of him." The voice behind him broke into Brendan's stupor, making him turn around. Colin had disappeared. It was Stan, their chief driver who stood there, marvelling at the body on the tiles.

"He's not…dead…is he?" The doubt in Stan's voice sank to a whisper as he caught the Orchestra Manager's gaze.

For an instant Brendan felt himself becoming unreasonably possessive about George Millar's mortal remains, resenting the additional presence of the driver. A sudden irritation pushed his qualms aside, that and a need to make things happen. He straightened his shoulders, placing himself between Stan and the body.

"We'll have to get Security. I'll use the phone next door. We'll need an ambulance," he hesitated for a second before adding, "and the police."

Stan turned to go but Brendan Phillips caught his arm, "Not a word, not from any of you," rasped Phillips. "Not until the police get here."

The Orchestra Manager walked out with Stan who was still trying to peer into the room behind them. Several feet from the doorway Colin had slumped to the floor, his back against the wall. The boy's face was the colour of putty.

"Take him downstairs and make him some tea. Just keep out of sight until I send for you. All right?"

The two men glanced at one another uncertainly. Then Stan stretched out a hand to Colin.

"Come on lad, let's be having you," he said, heaving the shifter to his feet. "Nice cup of tea to make you feel better."

Looking at the boy's grey complexion, Brendan Phillips doubted whether Colin would be able to keep anything down.

The immediate thing to do was to alert Security. Phillips looked up and down the red-carpeted corridor before taking out his copy of the master key and locking the door to Morar. Poliakovski, the Conductor, was safely ensconced in Lomond for the time being; thankfully the dressing room on the other side was empty. Phillips slipped inside, picked up the phone and dialled the code for Security.

"Neville?" Brendan visualised the Security man at the stage door as he spoke. He heard himself speaking in a voice belonging to some other person, someone in control, not the same man whose hands were shaking as they gripped the telephone. He couldn't believe that his own words sounded so clipped and emotionless as he

explained the situation.

He walked back, unlocking Morar in a daze, still trying to convince himself that he really had seen that body on the tiled floor. Telling Neville about it should have made it real, yet somehow he still wanted to believe that George would be standing there waiting for him, violin and bow in his carefully manicured hands. It would all be a mistake. There would be no corpse on the floor. But when he turned towards the entrance to the bathroom it was still there. Brendan closed his eyes seeking some kind of help. Nothing came into his mind. No childhood prayers from Sunday School. Not even a line from any of his favourite Requiems. All he could think of were the words, "Take this cup from me." When he opened his eyes again the sight of George's body filled him with shame.

Come on, Brendan Phillips, he muttered to himself, think on your feet. That was what the City Fathers were paying him to do, after all, he realised, although the job description had made no mention of bloodied corpses behind the scenes. There were no codes or procedures for this. He couldn't simply stride onto the platform announcing, "Ladies and gentlemen, tonight's concert has been cancelled due to the unforeseen death of the Leader of the Orchestra." But he'd have to make a decision quickly.

Locking the door to Morar for the second time that night, Brendan Phillips felt prickles of sweat break out on his forehead as he agonised over whether he ought to carry on with the concert.

Even as he approached the stage he still wasn't sure if it was the proper thing to do. He hovered in the wings

for a moment, aware of curious glances from members of the Percussion section.

He'd have to use the Second Fiddle. That woman, Karen, was ambitious. She'd be only too pleased to take over. And when the police arrived they would clear up whatever had happened back here, wouldn't they?