

The issue of applause was brought to my attention recently when it was reported that a conductor had motioned to an audience to stop clapping between movements of a symphony. This was mentioned in the context that some members of the audience felt embarrassed at being perceived as less-than-knowledgeable about proper concert etiquette.

The custom of applauding probably pre-dates recorded history. Since this is not intended as a crash course in ethnology, we'll focus on more recent times. In the 18th and 19th Centuries, audiences freely applauded between movements. Mozart was delighted when his audience clapped during his symphonies. It was not uncommon that a given movement be repeated immediately, particularly at premieres of new works, owing to the audience enthusiasm. This practice is somewhat understandable, given that more than likely it would be some time before the piece would be heard again. It wasn't until the 20th century that holding all applause until the end of the entire piece came into vogue. Exactly when is not known, and I'm not sure why or how this practice came to be. Did some society maven, socialite, or arts patron stand up at a concert and decree that hence forth applause between movements would no longer be tolerated? (It's recently been suggested that the practice came about with advent of radio broadcasts and recordings.)

There are arguments on both sides of the issue, and even considerable debate on a web blog. Some contend that clapping between movements interrupts the overall flow of the piece – that it breaks the mood. To be sure, applause after a particularly poignant slow movement can be irritating, but I'm not sure how this breaks the mood any more than the sounds of coughing, shifting in seats, turning of pages, etc. that one expects during the appropriate pauses. (Frankly, I would find a conductor's "fly swatting" to silence the audience just as disconcerting.) On the other hand, there are times when you literally have to sit on your hands to avoid clapping after an exciting movement, such as the rousing march in Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony or the first movement of his Violin Concerto. It's rather like trying to stifle a sneeze. There have been times when I

expected applause (at the “wrong” time), and almost felt choked by the tension and uptight vibes coming from an audience that was being “proper.”

I confess that I used to be of the former opinion. In retrospect, I think this was mainly a matter of conditioning – that it wasn’t “correct.” But over time, my thinking has changed. If a person is moved by the music and wants to show appreciation, why should we stifle that enthusiasm? (Disclaimer: Several years ago I was asked to say something about this subject from the stage prior to a concert. In what I thought was a polite, respectful, non-threatening manner, I mentioned that it wasn’t necessary to clap between movements. It was later reported to me that someone “in-the-know” felt insulted – that it wasn’t necessary for me to say anything, and that I was being condescending.)

More and more, we in the symphony orchestra business hear about the need to make the concert experience relevant to today’s audiences – that audiences want to be engaged. Orchestras of all sizes are searching for new ideas to attract people to the concert hall, numerous articles have been written on this subject. Why then would we want to risk alienating new audience members by looking askance should they happen to applaud at the “wrong” time? What I find more annoying is talking or the rustling of candy wrappers while the music is being played.

I say let people applaud when they are moved to do so. The musicians on stage are playing their hearts out, and they enjoy knowing their efforts are appreciated. Also, there’s a practical side to it: it gives us a little break before playing the next movement. Often times, we need a few moments to turn pages, change mouthpieces or instruments, check tuning, swab instruments, empty spit valves, blow our nose, etc. (Just a few of the things that set a live performance apart from listening to a CD!)

Think of other types of performances. At jazz concerts, audiences routinely applaud after each solo passage. Indeed, it is expected. And in opera, performances literally stop momentarily while the audience applauds the famous arias. In Europe, performances even stop while audiences boo soloists they feel aren’t up to snuff. (Tough crowd!)

So why is it that audiences of chamber and symphonic music are expected to curb their enthusiasm? I have no answer. Recently, I spoke with a publisher in St. Louis who mentioned the previous, now deceased, conductor of their world renowned orchestra who disdainfully complained in a newspaper interview that the audience coughed between movements. Would he have preferred they cough while the orchestra was playing? Get over it!

So in getting back to the point of this little essay, I'm of the opinion that a conductor bears some responsibility in this debate. If s/he wants to ensure there is no applause, s/he should make it abundantly clear by the choice of gesture, i.e. keeping one arm in the "ready" position, etc., and not taking too much time between movements. If the conductor gives no clear indication, audience members should not feel embarrassed if they applaud.

If you are one who would rather hold your applause until the very end, great. We welcome your sign of appreciation whenever you choose to show it. Another confession: when I'm a member of an audience, I generally hold my applause until the end. If there is clapping between movements, I just smile and relax. It's not worth getting upset over. I use the time to reflect on what was just played, get ready for what is to come, check the program, or open a can of beer (just kidding!).