

## Communication

**As I hurriedly boarded** the London-to-Edinburgh Express recently and found my seat in a thoughtfully designated 'quiet' coach, I settled back, foolishly content in the knowledge that a peaceful few hours lay before me away from the lager-swilling backpackers and tantrum-throwing youngsters who appeared to be boarding the other compartments.

Surveying my fellow passengers – a mixture of pin-striped business types and elderly sandwich nibblers already pondering crossword puzzles of mind-boggling magnitude, I thought to myself, 'Ah, the perfect travelling companions! **There won't be a word** out of any of them until we pull into Waverley'. I opened my case, took out a copy of Kuzuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* and began to enter into a world far removed from my actual surroundings.

No sooner had we chugged out of Euston that I was abruptly returned to reality by the high-pitched ringing of a mobile phone adjacent to me. Without making the slightest attempt to lower his voice and, if anything, raising it above the persistent triplets of the carriage's wheels, we were all treated to an analysis of a meeting concerning the buying and selling of dog food.

Although nobody was actually prepared to voice their contempt, the usual visual signals such as raised eyebrows, annoyed frowns and even angry glares were employed, but to no avail, as every point of competent as well as incompetent business was laid out before us in minute ghastly detail. (Being considerably larger built than myself and undoubtedly of a more forthright disposition I pretended to remain in Ishiguro's world.) It was only once the ticket inspector arrived some time later and he was reprimanded that we were finally relieved of his interminable babbling. Even so, he brought his conversation to its conclusion at his own pace, as if in defiance of the inspector's authoritarian tone.

'Yes, but what's all this to do with classical music?' I hear you ask. Well everything. As musicians we are fundamentally communicators, yet we humans have never been more distanced from one another, no matter how much one may marvel at modern-day technological advancements. That chap on the train may have communicated a great deal of information via his mobile phone to one person, but he also succeeded in alienating all those around him without probably realising it, or worse, realising it but not caring.

While I do not wish sound like a technophobe, perhaps it is time to pause for a moment to consider what we have lost rather than gained from this rapidly changing world of ours and to what extent these changes have affected the performing arts. A common complaint nowadays is that all pianists sound the same. While I would not entirely endorse such a complaint, there has undoubtedly been a narrowing of interpretative viewpoints partly caused by demands for so-called 'perfection' in the recording studios and partly by slavish 'urtext' obsessiveness.

In the days before commercial recordings pianists would play with a true sense of abandon because their performances belonged to the moment. When we now listen to Hofmann, Friedman, Grainger and many others from the piano's 'golden age', we discover what we have lost and what we can never hope to regain.

Yet the more desensitised we become, the more composers seem determined to make us sit up and listen by means of extreme dynamics and excruciating dissonances, fearing that prolonged respite might give us time to switch off altogether. The same is true of the modern cinema; many films are exhausting on both the eyes and ears as we are bombarded with one special effect after another, while directors gleefully drool over their new technological toys. The finest work of Renoir, Carne and Lubitch on the other hand will, I think, survive because it speaks directly to the human heart – and that quality has never been more relevant than it is today.

Brian Davidson

## Profile

Brian Davidson is a pianist, teacher, Associated Board examiner and writer on music. For a number of years he lectured in piano at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. He now lives in the Scottish Borders.