

Concert Interrupted

It was to be a majestic evening. On Friday, October 18, 1991, the world-class Chicago Symphony presented the final concert in its year-long celebration of the symphony's 100th year. For the first time in United States symphony history, the present conductor and two former conductors of an orchestra stood on the same stage: Rafael Kubelik, Georg Solti and Daniel Barenboim.

At a centenary celebration dinner before the concert, patrons had received souvenir clocks as gifts. As Daniel Barenboim sat down at the piano and Georg Solti lifted his baton to begin Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto, a great sense of drama filled Chicago's historic Orchestra Hall. And the beauty of the music took over.

A few minutes later, however, at 9:15 p.m., the music began to unravel. Out in the auditorium, a little beep sounded. Then another, and another. Little beeps were sounding everywhere. Barenboim and the symphony plowed ahead, but everyone was distracted and the music suffered.

Finally, after the first movement ended, Henry Fogel, the executive director of the symphony, walked onstage to explain what had happened. The manufacturer of the souvenir clocks presented at the pre-concert dinner had set the alarms to go off at 9:15.

Now there was only one way to get on with the concert. Fogel asked everyone who had one of the clocks to check them in with an usher.

The incident reminds me of cellular phones. In most audiences nowadays -- even in church -- one or more of those instruments can be heard, and usually at the worst moment. Trivial things have terrible power to disrupt, or even make a farce, of what is important in our lives.

--Beecher Hunter