

# MIND & BODY

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## Introduction

However many friends we might have and however busy our lives, most of us are still often at risk of feeling lonely. It can be hard to feel genuinely accepted and understood, or to connect sincerely with other people, even if we know that deep down they care for us and we for them.

We go to enormous efforts to engineer social occasions where we hope to drop our guard, reveal our vulnerabilities and share our more playful and intimate sides, and yet we can find that inhibition and tradition pull us away from the warmth and sympathy we crave. At the end of many a party, we say farewell to our guests knowing that there was so much more that might have been divulged or created together, but we remain unsure as to what we could have discussed or how we could have drawn out the more tender and profound aspects of one another.

To help us over our isolation, we have designed a range of initially artificial-sounding rituals that nevertheless have a power to liberate the more spontaneous part of ourselves and to be the vehicles for us to express the kindness, spirit of fun and curiosity we deep down possess in abundance. We present seven 'sociability exercises'.

## (i) The ecstatic dance

One of the strangest but most intriguing and redemptive things that humans get up to, in almost every culture, is occasionally to gather in large groups, bathe in the rhythmic sounds of drums and flutes, organs and guitars, chants and cries, and move their arms and legs about in complicated and frenzied ways, losing themselves in dance.

Dancing has a claim to be considered among the most essential and salutary activities we ever partake in. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, a painfully inhibited figure in day-to-day life, declared, 'I would believe only in a God who could dance' – a comment that stands beside his equally apodictic pronouncement: 'Without music, life would be a mistake.'

Despite this recommendation from the most unlikely of sources, dancing is an activity that many of us – arguably those of us who might most need to do it – are powerfully inclined to resist and deep down to fear. We stand on the side of the dance floor appalled at the possibility of being called to join in; we make our excuses the moment the music begins; we take pains that no one will ever, ever see our hips unite with a beat.

The point here is definitely not to learn to dance like an expert; it is to remember that dancing badly is something we might actually want to do and, equally importantly, something that we already know how to do to – at least to the appalling level that is the only proficiency we need to derive key benefits.

In almost all cultures and at all points of history (except our own, oddly enough), dancing has been widely understood as a form of exercise with something very important to contribute to our mental state. Dancing has had nothing to do with dancing well, being young or revealing one's stylishness. We might summarise it like this: dancing has been valued for allowing us to transcend our individuality and for inducing us to merge into a larger, more welcoming and more redemptive whole.



Shiva as the Lord of Dance, made in Tamil Nadu, India, c. 950-1000. Shiva, Lord of the Dance, celebrates harmony with the cosmos.



William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *The Youth of Bacchus*, 1884. A break from individualism and reason: Dionysus (also known as Bacchus to the Greeks and Romans) leading a dance.

One of the main gods of Hinduism was the dancing god Shiva. The meaning of Shiva's dance has a resonance far beyond a specific religion: by dancing, one may return to harmony with the cosmos. As limbs swing and bodies sway, the many details of our material and practical lives – our age, income, voting preferences, even our gender – drop away and we reunite with the totality.

A comparably rich vision of dancing developed in classical Greece. The Greeks were for the most part committed worshippers of the rational mind. Their foremost God, Apollo, was the embodiment of cool reason and disciplined wisdom. However, the Greeks understood that a life devoted only to serenity of mind could be at grave risk of desiccation and loneliness. They therefore balanced their concern with Apollo with regular festivals in honour of a quite different deity, Dionysus, a god who drank wine, stayed up late, loved music – and danced.

The Greeks knew that the more rational we usually are, the more important it is to occasionally fling ourselves around to the wild rhythms of pipes and drums. At the festivals of Dionysus, held in Athens in March every year, even the most venerable and dignified members of the community would join in unrestrained dancing that, lubricated by generous amounts of red wine, lasted until dawn.

A word often used to describe such dancing is the telling term 'ecstatic'. This comes from the Ancient Greek word *ekstasis*: *ek* (meaning 'out') and *stasis* (meaning 'standing'), indicating a state in which we symbolically stand outside ourselves, separated from the dense, detailed and self-centred layers of our identities that we normally focus on and obsess over, and reconnect with something more primal and more necessary: our common human nature. Through a period of ecstatic dancing, we remember what it is like to belong, to be part of something larger than ourselves, to be indifferent to our own egos, and to be reunited with humanity.

This aspiration hasn't entirely disappeared in modernity, but it has been assigned to very particular settings: the disco and the rave. These places often point us in unhelpful directions: towards being cool, of a certain age, and knowledgeable about very modish clothes and sounds – criteria that leave many of us out. We urgently need to recover a sense of the universal benefit of dancing. The greatest enemy of this is fear; in particular, the fear that we could look like an idiot in front of people whose opinion might matter. The way through this is not to be told that we will be fine and, with a bit of effort, far from idiotic. In fact, we should accept with good grace that the whole point of redemptive, consoling and cathartic communal dancing is the chance to look like total, thoroughgoing idiots, the bigger the better, in the company of hundreds of other equally and generously publicly idiotic fellow humans.

We spend a good deal of time fearing that we might be idiots and holding back from a host of important aspirations and ambitions as a result. We could shake ourselves from such inhibitions by relinquishing any remaining sense of dignity and by accepting that we are idiotic by nature. We are great sacks of foolishness that cry in the night, bump into doors, fart in the bath and kiss people's noses by mistake. Far from being shameful and isolating, this idiocy is a basic feature of our nature that unites us with everyone else on the planet. We are idiots now, we were idiots in the past, and we will be idiots in the future. There is no other option for a human.

Dancing provides us with an occasion when this basic idiocy can be publicly displayed and communally celebrated. On a dance floor filled with comparable idiots, we can at last delight in our joint foolishness; we can throw off our customary shyness and reserve and fully embrace our dazzling strangeness and derangement. An hour of frantic jiggling should decisively shake us from any enduring belief in our normalcy or seriousness. We will no longer be able to bully others, persuade them of our superiority, humiliate them for their mistakes or pontificate on weighty matters. We will no longer worry how others see us or regret a few things we said to intimidating strangers. The

gentle aches in our limbs and our memories of our moves will remind us of anchoring facts that will guarantee our ongoing sanity and kindness.

Whenever we have the chance to invite others around, especially very serious people by whom we are intimidated or who we might be seeking to impress, we should remember the divine Dionysus and dare, with his wisdom in mind, to put on 'Dancing Queen', 'I'm So Excited' or 'We are Family'. Knowing that we have Nietzsche on our side, we should let rip with a playlist that includes 'What a Feeling', 'Dance with Somebody' and 'It's Raining Men'. We should lose command of our normal rational pilot selves, abandon our arms to the harmonies, throw away our belief in a 'right' way to dance or indeed to live, build the intensity of our movements to a frenzy, gyrate our heads to empty them of their absurd worries, forget our jobs, qualifications, status, achievements, plans, hopes and fears, and merge with the universe – or at



Looking like an idiot shouldn't be a risk: it's the point.

least its more immediate representatives, our fellow new mad friends, before whom the disclosure of idiocy will be total.

Around us might be a shy accountant, an efficient dental nurse or a white-haired school principal bending up and down and flinging their arms in the air, throwing their heads back and contorting their bodies. After a few songs, something astonishing will begin to happen: it won't matter any more that we said a slightly out of place thing in a meeting two weeks ago, that we haven't yet met the love of our lives, or that we still don't understand very much. We will feel a part of something far more important than ourselves, a supportive community in which our individual errors and doubts will cease to weigh so heavily and punishingly upon us.

Through a dance, we glimpse a huge project: how we might more regularly experience ourselves as vulnerable in front of other people in order to become better friends to ourselves and more generous and compassionate companions to others. The true potential of dancing has for too long been abandoned by thoughtful people to stylish elites who have forgotten the elemental seriousness of allowing themselves to be and look idiotic. Let's reclaim the ecstatic dance and uninhibited boogie woogie for their deepest universal purposes: to reconnect, reassure and reunite us.



## (ii) The hand of the other

We know, in theory, about valuing other people: respecting them as unique individuals, listening to their voices and accepting humanity in all its majestic diversity. The lesson has been made for us in politics. Since the inception of Athenian democracy, or at least since the French and American revolutions, we have heard much about the near-sacred rights of every citizen, about our equal standing before authority, and about our universal claims to be heard and honoured. Christianity has made a comparable point in the spiritual sphere: everyone has a precious soul, everyone deserves love, we are all as unique and as precious as small children.

Yet whatever the theory, this is not quite how we live in practice. We largely dwell in suspicion of one another. We are quick to fill with anger and mistrust. We are ready to imagine the darkest things about strangers. Rarely do we surrender to benevolence or smiling tenderness towards our fellow humans.

But there might be a way to access such a mood via a physical exercise as peculiar-sounding as it may be consoling: with their consent, to take a minute to really study someone else's hand, holding it in ours and observing it with deep curiosity and imagination.

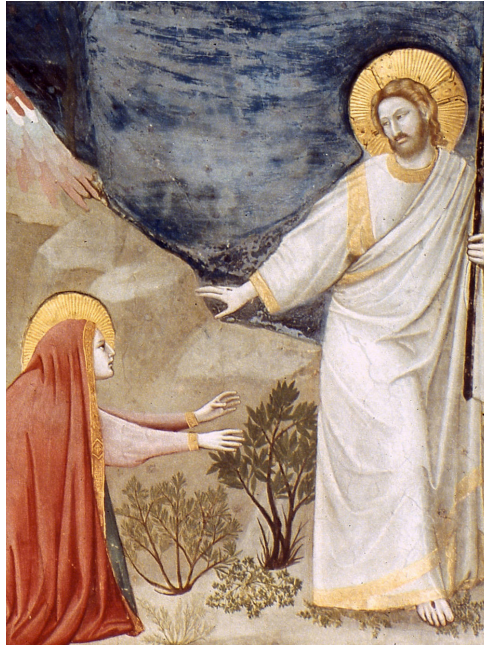
Palm readers have long known something that most of us overlook: that hands are very telling. Unfortunately, they have taken this insight into a fantastical direction, suggesting that hands can tell us the one thing that no one is ever able to know: what will happen in the future. But outside of this, their focus has surely been correct. Perhaps far more than other parts of the body, hands are supremely eloquent. We might say that if 'the soul', that confluence of deep identity, vulnerability and singularity, dwells anywhere, it is in the hands. To look closely over someone's hands, to open the palm, observe the fingers, follow the veins and examine the creases and folds, is to gain a powerful sense

of the newness and exoticism of their life. It is hard not to feel sympathy and even love, in the most innocent but sincere sense.

The path from a neglect of hands to their more appropriate appreciation can be tracked in the history of art. For most of the medieval period, artists knew that humans have hands, otherwise we would have trouble holding anything up (for example, our child), but they chose to see these organs in the most schematic and indistinct of ways. For the artist sculpting the mother of God out of walnut wood in Auvergne some time around 1200, hands were just hands in general, not *someone's* hands in particular.



*Virgin and Child in Majesty*,  
from Auvergne, France,  
c. 1175-1200

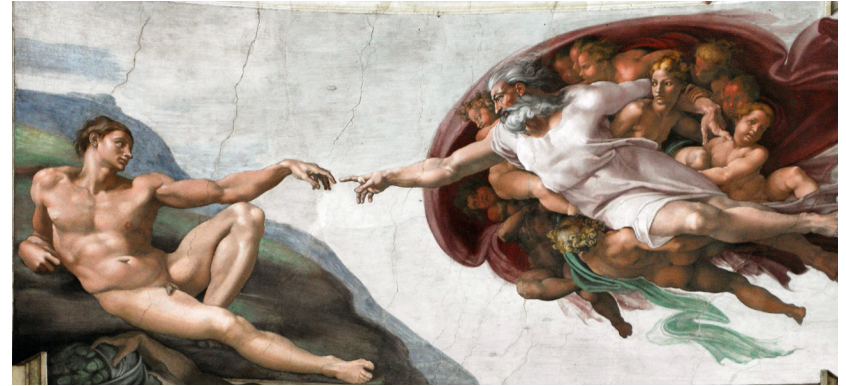


Giotto,  
Detail of Resurrection (*Noli me tangere*), c. 1305.

Even the Italian painter Giotto (c. 1267–1337), a genius at rendering emotion, evidently wasn't very interested in the details when depicting his characters' hands on the walls of the Scrovegni chapel in Padua around 1300: four sausage fingers and a thumb sufficed.

In Europe, it was only when we entered the late Renaissance that artists begin to become appropriately interested in some of the things that hands have to tell us.

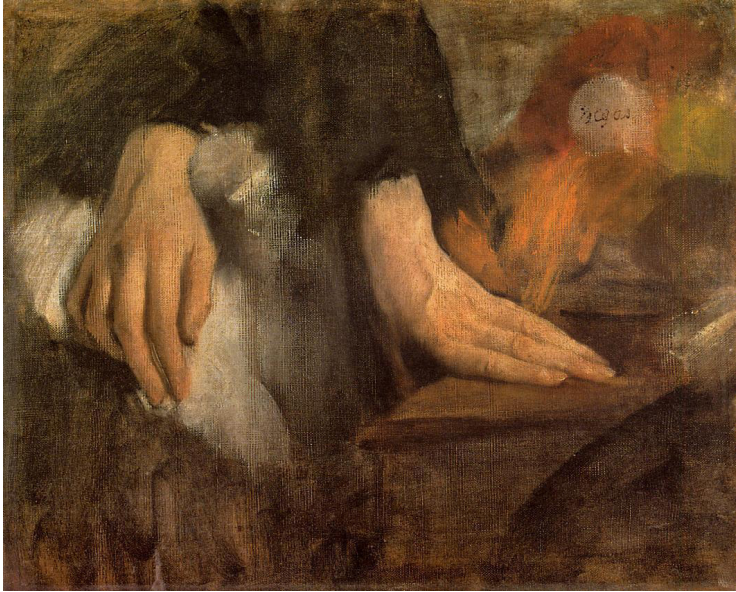
In one of the central works of the history of art, hands at last have a central place. The momentous moment of near contact between the human and the divine in Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* on the Sistine Chapel ceiling is articulated not via the mind or the eyes, but the fingers. It's not words or a smile or an embrace: all the intensity of the connection between man and god is focused on the precise position and character of two hands: on the



(Top): Michelangelo,  
*The Creation of Adam*, c.1509-1512.  
(Bottom): Detail. Here, hands become eloquent the divine spark reaches out to animate the newly created human.

left (human side) more drawn in and more languid; and on the right, godly, side more open, assertive and commanding. Fortuitously, in the decades after Michelangelo finished his labours, the plaster between the hands of the two central figures began to crack, creating a sense of ever-widening and poignant division in the relationship between the heavenly and the human.





Edgar Degas,  
*Study of Hands*, 1860. This eloquent  
study is sublimely expressive of the  
whole character of the sitter.

The idea of studying hands closely perhaps reached its highest point of development in the 19th century. A great artist such as Edgar Degas (1834–1917) might paint a pair of otherwise disembodied hands and leave us to fill in the entirety of the complex individual they belonged to, confident that, from these hints, we would have enough to imagine a whole life story.

Study any hand carefully enough, the artists appeared to be telling us, and you can learn the crucial elements of what matters in an individual.

We might try a similar exercise with an old or, more daringly, a new friend. Once this hand was tiny; it struggled to grasp a raisin. Probably they sucked their thumb; their fingers would have pulled up zips and undone buttons on their mother's cardigan. Their hand has been employed in their most intimate

activities. It's been clenched in anger; it's wiped away tears; the fingernails have dug into the palm at moments of anxiety; it's signed documents; made graphically rude gestures; it's clutched a wall in terror; it's been held by a parent before crossing a road. One day an undertaker will fold it carefully across this person's chest.

Through the study of a hand, we feel at an emotional level what might otherwise have remained an intellectual notion: that another person is just as complex, strange and multifaceted as we are; that they, like us, are the centres of their own bewilderingly rich and precious perceptions, and are every bit as worthy of consideration and sympathy. Once we look back up at their eyes after time with their hand, they might never be the same person again – in the best of ways.

We speak so much of universal brother- and sisterhood. But it isn't until we have spent some moments immersed in the stories whispered by another's hands that we stand to be able to turn an abstract aspiration into something properly useful and humanising.

### (iii) Sofa jumping

Adult social life labours under an arduous rule: that the better we want to get to know someone, the more serious the topics we raise with them should be. It might be acceptable to discuss the weather with a passing acquaintance, but when it comes to opening ourselves up to someone else and discovering their profound selves in turn, then we should head for the graver themes of existence: what we want to get out of our careers; what motivates us in relationships; how we assess our families; what politics should aim for. In this view, seriousness of mind is the royal road to friendship.

However, if self-disclosure and familiarity are really the underlying goals, we may have to study more closely the behaviour and wisdom of small children – in particular their insight that one cannot claim to know anyone well until the body has been closely engaged in the process of acquaintanceship.

Young children are often daringly uninterested in conversation. When breaking the ice with a new companion, they will skirt politics, they won't discuss the stock market, they will avoid consideration of family history or upcoming holidays. With the lack of respect for precedent that comes more naturally to someone newly arrived on the planet, they will try to do something physical even before names have been exchanged. When they are especially inspired, they might head for one of the most legendary bodily exercises of all: sofa jumping.

They will clamber up on to the nearest sofa, perhaps raising it in height by adding a few cushions, and then take a flying leap onto the floor, seeing how far they can land – and in particular, how much further than their new team mate. If the situation is auspicious, there will be a well-polished wooden floor or glossy tiles that will allow for skidding and the clearing of some remarkable distances.

The notion of being an adult is understandably linked to the idea of being serious. There is so much that we have to be responsible for; so many troubling facts that claim our attention, and so many potential difficulties to which we must be permanently alert.

Seriousness becomes a hidden enemy in getting on with other people properly, because our rational, thoughtful and controlled selves are only a limited part of who we really are. Yet meeting a person with due gravity is doomed to give us a distorted impression of them – and, equally, to convey a very unrepresentative slice of us.

A commitment to seriousness limits us too in terms of who we feel we might get on with. We become restricted to the sub-section of the world that shares our intellectual concerns, aesthetic orientations and psychological dispositions – as well as our preferred ways of discussing these. We prioritise the most erudite contents of our minds as the basis for our social existence. Practically no one else thinks about intellectual issues precisely as we do, yet many people remain highly viable friends. In other words, we will be committing ourselves to loneliness.

Instead of letting our mental prowess guide our friendships, we should let the body be the ambassador of intimacy. By current standards, it is ridiculous for a group of adults to clamber, one by one, onto a sofa in their socks and to strive with every muscle to take the largest leap of which they are capable, or to swing their arms backwards and make themselves into a rocket or a plane and attempt to land with some of the bounce and grace of a kangaroo or gazelle while collapsing far nearer to their launchpad than they would have wished into an indecorous, giggling and slightly bruised heap.

Nor is there anything especially respectable about growing competitive in the course of such a game, about getting into technical disputes with other participants ('Were the jumper's legs properly together as they leapt? Were

they together when they landed?’) and scouring the kitchen for some tape to mark everyone’s landing spot. But at the same time, seldom could silliness be more important.

We often do things that, later, we judge to have been absurd and ridiculous. We wince at how we could have been such numbskulls and vow never to embarrass ourselves again. But the true way out of embarrassment is not to attempt to expunge it from our routines; it is to orchestrate occasions when it can have an honoured place in our social lives.

Calculated, on-purpose silliness means willingly abandoning our minds’ overly rigid notions of dignity. We should strive to be adult enough to consent – for a while – to the claims of childhood, a period of our lives when we knew blessedly little about house prices and what Picasso thought of capitalism.

Sofa jumping has a power to transform our relationships with others because, at last, we’ve been idiots *together*. Instead of our foolishness (which we try

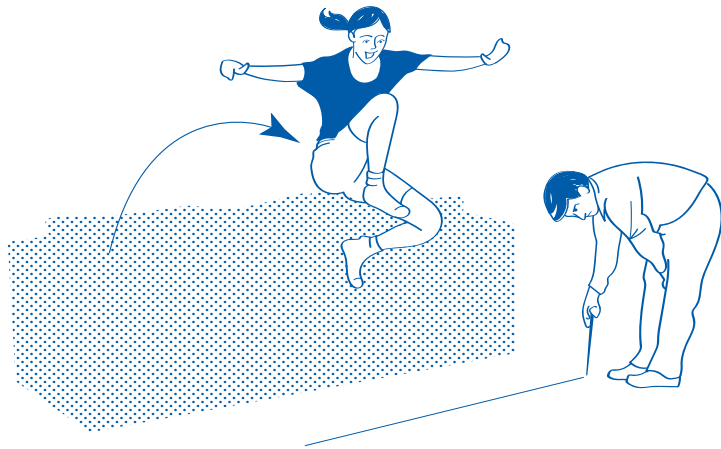


Fig. 01  
Sofa Jumping

so hard to keep secret) being a barrier to connection and the grounds for shame and blushing, it becomes an arena in which we can meet as equals. Fortunately, we can’t ever take someone entirely seriously again after we have seen them screwing up their eyes before taking a leap or eagerly disputing just how far they’ve jumped across the room as compared to their opponents. In other words, after sofa jumping, we can’t ever treat them with unimaginative indifference again.

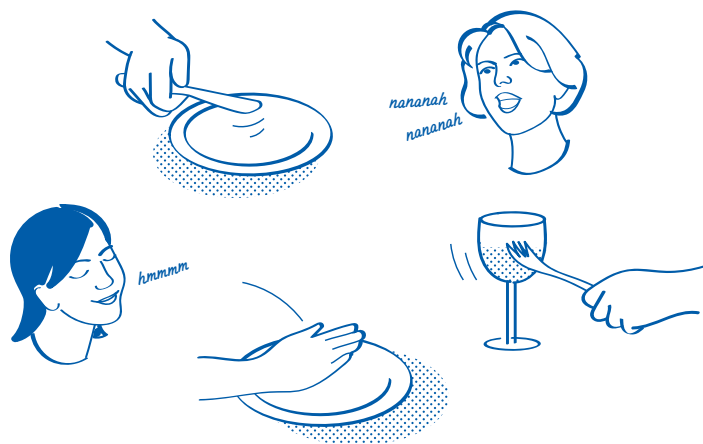
Part of the enormous appeal of sex is its power to change the dynamics of a relationship with another person. After we have seen someone naked, perhaps on all fours, writhing in pleasure, after we have caressed the intimate zones of their body, and seen them passionately interested in a few parts of ours, we know them in a wholly new way. There will be a complicity between us: smiles will come more readily, as will forgiveness and tenderness. It won’t matter so much that they might earn far more than we do or have studied a great deal longer; we will in important ways be allies and soulmates.

For practical (though sometimes slightly sad) reasons, we aren’t able to have sex with very many people in the course of our lives. And yet the quest for greater intimacy and connection that to a significant extent powers our sexual appetites is capable of being deployed elsewhere. It would be tragic if all our longings for warmth would forever have to pass through the narrow gate of sex. Fortunately, through the game of sofa jumping, we have another, far more available, chance to build up the connections we long for. No true encounter should be complete without at least a few rounds.

## (iv) Dinner table orchestra

One of the most astonishing and moving of all sights is that of a well-practised orchestra working together to perform a great symphonic masterpiece. Along with 47 other equally focused colleagues, Sigrid will be sawing away at the violin, Jai-wu bellowing into a trombone, and Kaspar pounding the tympany – but the result will be the opposite of chaos. Despite every human remaining an unfathomable, self-focused individual, for a time the members of an orchestra are able to generate a sublime sense of harmony. Their collective work stands as one of the most beguiling metaphors for what we would ideally want social life to be like: a setting in which every person can make their own unique contribution in a beautifully coordinated way to a noble, overarching whole.

This kind of coherence is one we normally despair of experiencing ourselves, unless we started on the viola at seven and are deft at following a conductor's baton. At the same time, we know that when friends are gathered around the dinner table, each person's individuality too often leads to disagreement and discord, or at least incomprehension and boredom. We may love our friends, but it is rarely easy to access a feeling of collective harmony.



There is an exercise that can allow us to experience the kind of cohesion that the members of an orchestra will generate but that does not require us to practise for four hours a day for twelve years. One person starts by knocking out a steady beat on the table with their hand. The person next to them then strikes a fork (very gently) on a wine glass to a different rhythm. The person beside them uses their plate as a delicate drum, carefully banging their knife against the rim in a complementary beat. The next individual has the job of letting out a 'hmmm' sound in time with the knife, and another person joins in with an occasional 'nananah...nananah'. Gradually, a little social miracle occurs: by an ingrained social instinct we collectively cohere around a harmonious tone. We've started an orchestra; we're making music; we are almost 'one'.

It is a useful strategy to try something along these lines quite early on in the evening, just for quarter of an hour or so, especially if a few of the guests are potentially agitated or querulous. The experience of being part of an ensemble has a lingering effect. It's not so easy to get irritated by someone's view on public holidays or the American Civil War if, only a little while before, you've been happily nanah-ing and plate clinking together.