

SMART CONCERTS :

# Orchestras in the Age of Edutainment

A continuing discussion of issues, practices and changes in symphony orchestra organizations.



This is the fifth in a series of issues briefs designed to continue the discussion we began a decade ago with partners in the symphony orchestra field in the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation's Magic of Music\* initiative.

We encourage you to send comments about the issues and topics in this series to [publications@knightfdn.org](mailto:publications@knightfdn.org) or visit [www.knightfdn.org](http://www.knightfdn.org).

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**Whether motivated by demand, philanthropy or a personal vision of something new, creative music directors, musicians and even a few marketing directors are slowly reshaping the 19<sup>th</sup> century orchestra concert into a 21<sup>st</sup> century leisure experience. What would happen if an orchestra invited its audiences – current and potential – to suggest ideas for performance themes that might respond uniquely to their community?**

## **Smart Concerts: Orchestras in the Age of Edutainment**

**Alan Brown**

The Minnesota Orchestra learned the hard way about the perils of introducing new concert formats. In 2003, the orchestra decided to offer a Saturday night subscription series in a somewhat less formal, more interactive atmosphere, with brief introductions from the stage by orchestra musicians and visiting artists. Results from a survey conducted by the orchestra had indicated that “audience members overwhelmingly enjoy the speaking from the stage, and find it informative,” according to Gwen Pappas, a spokeswoman for the orchestra.

But on several occasions a lone member of the audience would boo loudly after the introduction in a time-honored display of displeasure usually reserved for opera singers who don’t measure up.

There were three vociferous objectors, the orchestra learned. And what they objected to wasn’t the welcoming message or the helpful insight, but the talking itself – a disruption of the familiar concert ritual, acted out night after night on countless stages around the world. “Don’t mess with my concerts!” they seemed to be saying, taking a position in a growing debate about the future of the concert experience.



*Philadelphia  
Orchestra violinist  
Richard Amoroso  
greet the audience  
and introduces a  
piece at a July 2004  
concert at the Mann  
Center for the  
Performing Arts.*

More and more orchestras are rethinking how classical music concerts are presented and experimenting with new formats and unconventional programming in hopes of attracting new audiences. In doing so, they are running headlong into a controversy that pits the sanctity of the classical concert experience – the view that the music alone speaks for

itself – against a swelling tide of evidence that many in the audience and, importantly, many who are not, want help becoming better listeners and would prefer a more informal, educational and interactive concert experience. Emotions run high on both sides.

This essay takes stock of what’s happening in concert halls around the United States. Four strategies for enhancing the concert are discussed: contextual programming, dramatization of music, visual enhancements and embedded interpretation. Examples are provided throughout. A concluding section summarizes what appears to be a seismic shift in concert programming and reflects on the implications for musicians, orchestras and audiences.

To set the stage for this analysis, let’s step back and first consider some relevant trends at the intersection of music and consumer behavior that might shed some light on the future of the live orchestra concert experience.

## **Toward Customization and Intensity**

Arts participation occurs against a backdrop of changing leisure patterns and a quicksilver notion in the public psyche of what constitutes an enjoyable evening out. Several important trends are worth mentioning.

The criteria for a successful entertainment experience change along with values and lifestyles. Some people want to engage fully and learn something every time they go out, while others idealize a more passive, disconnected experience. A precious few seek the challenge of unfamiliar art, while many more prefer the comfort of revisiting familiar works. Very little is known about the hierarchy of decision making or how customer satisfaction affects future attendance. Strangely, some people will go with friends to arts events that they would never choose for themselves.<sup>1</sup> In their decision making, the value of spending time with a friend is more important than the particulars of the program (i.e., artists, repertoire). As the sophistication levels in the audience mature over time, expectations for fulfillment diverge. And so an orchestra’s ability to satisfy everyone with one product gets more and more difficult.

Rather than spending \$20 for a balcony seat at five performances, more people will spend \$100 for a great seat to a single must-see show. This is not peculiar to the entertainment sector, but part of a larger trend toward trading up to premium products and experiences. The new calculus of risk and reward goes something like this: as the price of admission goes up, the willingness to risk an unsatisfactory experience goes down. These days, it seems, consumers will pay almost anything to guarantee a home run. On Broadway, producers now charge previously unthinkable prices for priority seating at hot shows. Museums and musical theater producers, with their blockbuster shows, have traded handsomely on this trend, creating events that tap into a mysterious blend of ritualism, spectacle and the subconscious reinforcement of one’s place in the world that comes from doing something with thousands of others. Orchestras have yet to claim their share of the blockbuster consumption phenomenon, although The Three Tenors certainly did.

<sup>1</sup>For a more substantial discussion of the role of social context in driving arts attendance, read Knight Foundation Issues Brief #4: “Initiators and Responders – A New Way to View Orchestra Audiences.”



2003 Sydney  
Symphony Superdome  
Spectacular –  
a very grand finale.

As leisure time continues to evaporate, the pressure to achieve nirvana at each cultural outing increases. The same is true for sports (think *extreme*) and other leisure pursuits. This goes a long way to explain the increased frequency of standing ovations these days. The subtle subtext of rising with an audience to acknowledge a great performance is the deep need to validate one's own participation in the ritual and to identify with those who can tell the difference between a good performance and a great one – even when you can't.

Within the realm of music, the download phenomenon represents a critical shift in how people develop preferences for different kinds of music and zero in on their favorite artists. More people have access to more music. (Imagine the following Maria Callas would have had if she had lived in the Internet era!) Consequently, more people are able to experience the music of cultures and time periods other than their own. And more people have more highly developed preferences – a better sense of what they like and, one might hope, an openness to new sounds. Hence the conundrum of both broadening and narrowing tastes, as people are more able to search and find exactly what they like, and then compile it to their own satisfaction.

In his book *Who Needs Classical Music?*, Julian Johnson argues that classical music, fundamentally, is discursive in nature and requires careful and complete listening in order to be fully appreciated. Instead, he says, most consumers "use" (or misuse) classical music to alter or underscore their mood, or just to fill empty time.<sup>2</sup> Mass culture's appropriation of classical music may be good or bad, depending on your point of view, but there is a larger idea here. Much of music's allure derives from the relative ease with which it can be selected and programmed by the listener. In focus groups, music lovers describe how they listen to one kind of music for vacuuming, another kind of music for cooking, another kind of music for exercising, and so forth. Consumers understand what it means to be your own curator, and derive great satisfaction from arranging art around them to the satisfaction of their own aesthetic – especially music and visual art.

<sup>2</sup>Julian Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music? Cultural Choice and Musical Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

2003 Sydney  
Symphony Superdome  
Spectacular –  
thematic projections  
enhance Bolero.



Anyone with TiVo or digital cable service knows about the customization of entertainment. You choose what to watch, when you're ready. Netflix.com, the web-based DVD subscription service, offers consumers a vast library of films on demand: a DVD arrives in the mail; when you've finished watching it, drop it in the mail, and your next movie arrives days later. Customization is driving retailers, as well. One of the hottest stores now in upscale malls across the country is Build-a-Bear Workshop, where children assemble their own teddy bears, drawing from a plethora of preassembled parts. The business strategy is to empower each customer to create something unique, with value built around convenience, flexibility and choice. Against this backdrop, most orchestras offer a preset program at a fixed time in a single location, and ask you to buy it six to twelve months in advance.

Research on classical music audiences uncovers a range of consumer opinions about the visual aspect of orchestra concerts. Some music lovers are enthralled with the visual tableau. For them, much of the value of concertgoing has to do with watching the conductor and the ensemble and the interplay between them. Others find the visual aspect of orchestra concerts boring or distracting. They are likely to close their eyes and let their imaginations create a visual counterpoint to the music.

Outside of the orchestra world, the standard for visual enhancement of live concerts is high and going higher, driven by technological advances in lighting and real-time digital image reproduction. The lighting and special effects at large-scale concerts by pop stars are breathtaking and a vital part of the total experience. Over the past 20 years, artists such as Philip Glass, the Kronos Quartet and others pioneered the integration of theatrical elements into the traditional concert setting, including lighting, film, projections and other visual effects. One could argue that the visualization of music is still in its infancy, from a technological perspective, as millions discover the possibilities of synchronizing algorithms with digital music on their home computers (e.g., the "visualizations" feature of Windows Media Player), a sort of private *Fantasia*. The gap between visual experiences at popular

and classical concerts is not lost on classical audiences, who increasingly attend both types of events.

As the diversity of visual, aural, tactile and other stimuli in our lives increases, so the brain learns to accommodate them. Parents marvel at how their children can do homework on a computer while simultaneously listening to the radio or watching TV. It is commonplace now to see people reading while listening to their iPods, two fundamentally different and demanding cognitive exercises. In the age of IMAX films and surround-sound home theater, it is truly amazing that people drive to concert halls at all. The resiliency and relevance of the art, thankfully, is still compelling enough to bring people out, although the visual realization of classical concerts and other types of live entertainment continues to diverge. It is not hard to imagine a time when multisensory engagement will be standard fare in the concert hall.

The sum of all these trends is a demand for increasingly intense and pleasurable leisure and learning experiences. In other words, the threshold for satisfaction is higher now, and not just with music but with other stimulants. Disney figured this out nearly 15 years ago when it created the Disney Institute, a destination for adult learning vacations. Kids who grew up with interactive museum exhibits and video games are now hyperstimulated adult consumers driving the experience economy. Their offspring, meanwhile, are playing in children's edutainment centers with activities such as pretend supermarkets, dinosaur digs and television studios.<sup>3</sup> How will orchestras capture the fecund imagination of the next generation of experience learners?

None of this should be surprising to anyone involved in the arts and entertainment business. Quite apart from these trends, it must be said, music appears to be as necessary to people as it ever has been, if not more so. Yet accounting for these trends in the daily operations of orchestras and other arts organizations is exceedingly difficult, in part because the resources for experimentation are almost nonexistent – even when the will is there – and partly because the culture and structure of the orchestra field do not value innovation, experimentation or planned change.

The overarching point here is that leisure trends are moving people further and further away from fixed, static experiences, and anyone who thinks that classical music concerts are somehow immune to the shifting sands of cultural tastes and consumer behavior is sadly mistaken.

Fortunately, there are strong indications that a new era of innovation is dawning on the orchestra field, however slowly and tentatively, in counterpoint to the more frequent reports of bankruptcies and painful downsizing. Whether championed by board members, staff, musicians or music directors – and sometimes in spite of them – new ideas for how to present concerts are bubbling up all over the place. Let's take a look at what's going on.

<sup>3</sup>“Edutainment” is defined alternatively as: 1) the act of learning through a medium that both educates and entertains; 2) a form of entertainment that is designed to be educational. Although the term was coined in the 1970s, perhaps Leonard Bernstein pioneered the concept with his popular Saturday afternoon Young People's Concerts, broadcast on television in the 1960s.

## Concert Enhancement Strategies

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As a preamble to this section, we should acknowledge that orchestra concerts presented in a traditional format are the preference of many, if not most, frequent concertgoers and a wonderful way to experience live classical music. It is often observed that those who advocate for the sanctity of the traditional concert format tend to be the older, wealthier orchestra patrons, often board members and donors whose opinions count more at the end of the day. And as corporate benevolence and government funding shrink, the balance of power tips further toward wealthy individuals. Musicians and music directors, who are accustomed to planning and playing concerts a certain way, are more or less complicit, although increasing numbers see opportunities for engaging audiences in new ways.



*The Vancouver Symphony Orchestra's Musically Speaking series was designed for newcomers to classical music.*

It is difficult, if not impossible, to guess what percentage of the potential audience – those who attend infrequently or are absent from the concert hall altogether – would prefer alternative concert formats.<sup>4</sup> The concert experience wasn't always so formal, music historians point out, nor need it be. Tradition may be a time-honored precedent, but it is not a blueprint for the future.

In an effort to make sense of what's new in mainstage orchestra programming, let's discuss four strategies for enhancing the concert.

### Contextual Programming

How two or three pieces of classical music wind up together on the same program is a mystery to most concertgoers. The elements of balance and juxtaposition in a program may be self-evident to musicians and seasoned concertgoers, but many patrons, research suggests, leave the concert hall wondering how and why the program they heard got put together the way it did. Program notes provide background information on each piece, but seldom explain the connections or counterpoints between pieces on the same program.

I define contextual programming as the practice of selecting programs, series and even whole seasons around unifying ideas – topics, themes, genres, idioms, artists and other constructs – however focused or oblique. Contextual programs have more conceptual glue holding them together. There is more to “get” than the sum of the individual pieces and, therefore, greater potential value to the audience. The possibilities are endless – limited only by the creative knowledge of the programmers and the ambition to make a larger, coherent artistic statement. There is risk, as well.

<sup>4</sup>In a recent survey of ticket buyers, a chamber music presenter in Maine found that 28 percent prefer concerts presented in the “traditional format,” 47 percent prefer an “informal format, with introductions from the stage” and 25 percent have no preference.



Anniversary programs, usually in observance of a composer's birth or death, are a common form of contextual programming. This season, several European and American orchestras will observe the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of composer Antonin Dvorak's death. Next season (2005-2006), many orchestras will celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mozart's birth with special programs. In addition to artfully selecting pieces by the same composer, the greater challenge here is designing the educational and interpretive elements that would help audiences understand the significance of the occasion.

Concert experiences designed for adult newcomers to classical music are a substantial development. These programs are contextual in that they are designed around a larger, welcoming purpose. They are not just regular or abbreviated concerts preceded by cocktail hours, but classical concerts built from the ground up as introductory experiences. Beginning in the 2004-2005 season, the Atlanta Symphony is offering a new series called *Symphony 360°*, designed with this purpose in mind. The Vancouver Symphony Orchestra's *Musically Speaking* series is also for newcomers. The Fort Wayne Philharmonic's *Unplugged* series, which began in 1996, is designed to attract a younger audience. *Unplugged* concerts feature familiar repertoire, video enhancements, greetings and introductions from the stage, guest hosts and post-concert socializing.<sup>5</sup> As part of the series in 2005, the Philharmonic will offer a pair of concerts called *The Conductor's Apprentice*. Other orchestras package together programs that might be appealing to newcomers (e.g., the Chicago Symphony's series of Introductory Concerts on Tuesday nights), although one could argue this is more of a matter of creative packaging than programming for newcomers.



*A variety of theatrical elements added a rich and moving context to the Oregon Symphony's August 2003 presentation of Defiant Requiem: Verdi at Terezin, conducted by Murry Sidlin.*

Thematic programming seems to be on the rise, according to Evans Mirageas, a programming consultant to several orchestras, who has led workshops on thematic programming for the American Symphony Orchestra League.

The New York-based Eos Orchestra, founded in 1995 by Jonathan Sheffer, defines itself as "a driving force in the revitalization of the live music experience." Every Eos program is contextual in some respect, from explorations of the intersections of music and images to contemporary adaptations of Wagner operas. Eos concerts typically involve theatrical elements of one sort or another.

<sup>5</sup>For more information about the *Unplugged* series and other nontraditional programs funded in part through Knight Foundation's Magic of Music Programs, see Issues Brief #3, *Innovations to Save Our Orchestras*.

Other thematic programs explore connections between music and literature. The Brooklyn Philharmonic, for example, presented a program entitled *The Music of Shakespeare* in 2003. The program featured three pieces inspired by the Bard's prose, selected by music director Robert Spano. The Houston Symphony's music director, Hans Graf, selected fairy tales as an overarching theme for the orchestra's 2004-2005 season. To serve this theme, Graf selected numerous pieces based on allegory, ranging from Bartok's *The Wooden Prince* to Ravel's *Mother Goose Suite* and Stravinsky's *Firebird*.

The San Diego Symphony's popular *Light Bulb* series, originally conceived by conductor Jung-Ho Pak, was designed around the idea of presenting music in context. The programs explore the stories behind favorite classical works. A program scheduled for January 2005, to be conducted by Murry Sidlin, is entitled *Can Classical Music Be Funny?*

Thematic programming, however broad or esoteric, creates a conceptual contract with the audience to deliver on the theme. If the concertgoer leaves the hall without an enhanced understanding of the theme – or at least how the selected repertoire serves the theme, then the contract is broken and an opportunity to connect with the audience on a deeper level is missed.



*The World Youth Orchestra performs with the Peking Acrobats.*

Contextual programming, however, need not be thematic. In fact, thematic programming is often offered without much context, while nonthematic programs are given added context by communicative conductors who introduce pieces from the stage and open a window into the creative process for the audience. At the core of contextual programming is a strategy for communicating to the audience what is interesting and exciting about the music.

There is nothing new about contextual programming, although more of it seems to be going on now. One could argue that added context, at some level, is slowly becoming a new standard for classical music programming. It takes more work, more dialogue and more collaboration to pull off contextual programming. If these examples are any indication, there is enormous potential in thinking creatively about the context in which live concerts are presented. Ask the musicians in an orchestra if they have any ideas for contextual programs, and most likely many fine suggestions would be offered. What would happen if an orchestra invited its board members and others in the community to suggest ideas for themes that might respond uniquely to their community?

## Dramatization of Classical Music

The integration of theatrical elements into the concert experience is another area of growing interest. This milieu includes classical music programs that are theatrically produced in service of a larger concept or purpose using some combination of narration, drama, dance, scenery, lighting and video. But the music remains the main attraction. There are numerous examples.

For 2004-2005, the Los Angeles Philharmonic offers a four-concert series called *First Nights*, which blends theater, music and multimedia presentations to recreate the historical, political and cultural context for premieres of landmark works. The series was conceived by Harvard professor Thomas Forrest Kelly and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen, and is produced by actor-director John de Lancie.

First produced in April 2002 by the Oregon Symphony, *Defiant Requiem: Verdi at Terezin* blends classical music (Verdi's *Requiem*) with drama, history, archival film, video and lighting effects. The program was conceived, written and conducted by Murry Sidlin as part of a larger series of nontraditional concerts called *Nerve Endings*. The orchestra's 2004-2005 *Front Row Center* series looks at three cities (Vienna, Moscow and Paris) that historically provided the setting of great musical development and change, promising a look behind the music at how politics and culture influenced the composer's work. "Each performance promises a unique experience, utilizing dramatic elements to make the story come alive," says the orchestra's promotional material.

Theatrically staged concerts are offered by numerous other orchestras and chamber music groups, including the Atlanta Symphony and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. The Utah Symphony, under the baton of Keith Lockhart, has been experimenting with visual enhancements and added theatrical elements, including original choreography, interpretive video production and even puppetry. Similarly, Chamber Music PLUS, based in Hartford, Conn., offers original programs of chamber music brought to life through drama. Professional actors take on real and imagined roles and act out scenes that dramatize the music.



*Unusual ensembles take the spotlight in the University of Michigan School of Music's dramatic collage concert.*

A highly theatrical concert format – the collage concert – is used by some ensembles and music schools to showcase talent. These concerts feature a variety of musical selections played sequentially and without breaks – the last beat of one piece is the first beat of the next. At each transition, lighting cues dramatically shift attention to the next ensemble. The contrast and juxtaposition of pieces, which can be extreme, add an element of surprise. Several music schools, including the University of Michigan School of Music and Interlochen Center for the Arts, use these concerts to showcase diverse performing forces.

While there is nothing new about the marriage of classical music and drama, there is much interesting work going on in the dramatization of classical music, ranging from the introduction of scenery and lighting into otherwise traditional concerts, to radical reinterpretations of classical pieces as theatrical events that incorporate the music into a larger program concept. Whether these efforts are successful from an artistic standpoint depends on the strength of the creative conception and the quality of execution. When they work, these programs can heighten emotional impact and move an audience to a new and enhanced level of appreciation for the music, the composer and the performers.

## Visual Enhancements

Perhaps the most controversial development in classical music programming over the past few years is the introduction of visual enhancements. Numerous orchestras are experimenting with – or have already committed to – various efforts designed to enhance the visual aspect of concerts. These can be divided into two categories: visual enhancements that add an artistic element to the concert, and visual enhancements that (literally) magnify the performers.

It is not unusual for orchestras to introduce visual elements such as banners, flags, projections and ambient lighting to the stage, sometimes in service of a theme or special occasion. At its recent Ives festival, the New York Philharmonic suspended a colorful banner over the orchestra, a pastiche of images evoking New England. Several orchestras have performed Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* coupled with projections of artworks, and Gustav Holst's *The Planets* with celestial images projected onto large screens above the orchestra or onto the ceiling of the hall. The film-inspired *Lord of the Rings Symphony*, which numerous orchestras programmed this year, includes projections of conceptual art by Alan Lee and John Howe. In his review of the concert, Seattle Times critic Jeff Shannon described the visuals as "graceful" and "a mood-enhancing reference to the music's place in Tolkien's saga."

The Kronos Quartet is well known for integrating video and other visual elements into its concerts, to critical acclaim. Other ensembles have had a more difficult time of it, and there are hair-raising stories of audience revolt. Writing for the New York Times, Allan Kozinn sums up his feelings about the marriage of music and video this way: "... if it [the video] isn't so thoroughly thought through that it becomes an organic part of the show... it can do more harm than good."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Allan Kozinn, "An Adventure for Concertgoers When Video Embellishes Sound," *The New York Times*, Nov. 19, 2003.



*The Houston Symphony's new video system uses two screens high above the stage.*

Video productions at large-scale concerts – both rock and classical – are becoming the norm. The Boston Lyric Opera mounted two huge screens beside its outdoor stage for two free public performances of *Carmen* on Boston Common in 2002. Each night, audiences of more than 50,000 people enjoyed close-up views of the singers. The Sydney Symphony, in Australia, performs in a fully produced large-scale program once or twice a year at the Sydney Superdome, the arena at Olympic Park outside Sydney. The programs are produced by Creation Entertainment, a commercial event promoter. For a 2003 show (which included *1812 Overture*, *Bolero* and opera selections), a creative team used state-of-the-art technology to project images evocative of each piece onto a huge screen, 165 feet wide and nearly 30 feet high, that was raised above the stage.<sup>7</sup>

More significant are recent efforts to bring real-time video production into the concert hall. The Houston Symphony, with philanthropic support, debuted “the nation’s first permanently installed video system” in May 2004. The system includes three cameras, two mounted under box seats at each side of the stage, and the third mounted on the conductor’s podium. Images are fed to a control room beneath the stage, and then projected onto large screens suspended above the stage. For now, the orchestra plans to use the video system for children’s concerts, pops concerts and special events.

Other orchestras in various stages of introducing real-time video enhancements include the Omaha Symphony, the San Diego Symphony and the Vancouver Symphony. Several institutions have experimented with video but have decided not to move ahead with it. The Aspen Music Festival’s “Keyboard in the Sky” video project garnered a mixed response from audiences and was shelved. The New York Philharmonic’s well-publicized trial of large-screen video production early in 2004 attracted a full house to Avery Fisher Hall, but was

<sup>7</sup>The technical contractor for these concerts was The Electric Canvas, a Sydney company specializing in large format stills and film and effects projection. See [www.theelectriccanvas.com.au](http://www.theelectriccanvas.com.au).

disparaged by several Philharmonic musicians in a follow-up article in *The New York Times*. “It’s going the route of MTV,” said concertmaster Glenn Dicterow.<sup>8</sup>

The Philadelphia Orchestra first experimented with a two-screen video system at the Academy of Music in 1996, with funding assistance from Knight Foundation. “Our classical subscribers didn’t like it,” reports J. Edward Cambron, the orchestra’s vice president for marketing and public relations, “but children and new audiences did.”

The technology has come a long way in the last five years, and orchestras are still learning how and when to use video technology most effectively in the concert hall. It will be some time before quality standards for video production are established. The trend, at least initially, is to use video enhancements for educational and pops concerts and special events. So far, only a few orchestras have committed to using video at classical subscription concerts. It will take time for audience members to sort out whether they prefer concerts with or without the video, and there are important issues to resolve with musicians with respect to their ability (or willingness) to share the stage with a digital magnification of themselves.

But the writing is on the wall. Audiences are accustomed to seeing live, real-time video productions at pop music concerts, and this heightened expectation for visual stimulation follows them into the concert hall. Tastefully produced visual enhancements represent a rare opportunity to fundamentally improve the visual aspect of the concert experience for an audience that desires more visual stimulation.

## Embedded Interpretation

*“Over my dead body will they show those things [supertitles] at this opera house. I cannot imagine not wanting the audience riveted on the performers at every moment.”*

— James Levine, music director, Metropolitan Opera, 1985

In the 20 years since James Levine made his infamous comment, supertitles have become standard fare in U.S. opera houses and are credited with opening up the art form to a new generation of opera lovers. Similarly, audio guides have opened up the museum-going experience to a new generation of visual art lovers. Now, after a long wait, the orchestra field is warming up to the idea of offering concertgoers interpretive assistance during concerts.

Two types of interpretive assistance are now in use: self-initiated interpretive aids (e.g., program notes, web-based resources such as audio clips and other online resources, and educational CDs distributed by mail to ticket buyers), and interpretive assistance integrated into the concert. The essential distinction is that the first type of interpretive assistance happens around the music, and the second type of interpretive assistance happens with the music.

<sup>8</sup>Robin Pogrebin, “For Symphony Fans, The Touch of MTV,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 23, 2004.


**JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH**  
(1685–1750)

**BRANDENBURG CONCERTO NO. 4 IN G MAJOR**  
BWV 1049  
Movement III–Presto

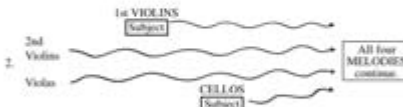
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LISTENING GUIDE


1. VIOLAS play the SUBJECT first. Then the 2nd VIOLINS (Counter-subject).



2. 1st VIOLINS (Subject), 2nd Violins, Violas, CELLOS (Subject). All four MELODIES continue.



3. Two SOLO RECORDERS add their special voices to the FUGUE.



*At the Philharmonic Orchestra of New Jersey's popular Discovery Concerts, everyone in the audience receives a listening guide.*

No one disagrees that offering concertgoers more information about the program is a good thing. But how and when to do this is hotly debated. Purists argue that the value of a live concert is implicit in the music – that everything you could hope to take away from a performance is obtainable through the act of listening. They believe that embellishment of any sort is unnecessary, invasive and even counterproductive. “How could I possibly add anything to Beethoven’s Fifth?” asked one conductor when pressed about his reluctance to speak from the stage. Others, armed with market research, believe that many in the audience want help becoming better listeners, but aren’t getting the help they want from program notes and pre-concert lectures that are seen as overly erudite. For these classical music lovers, and for those who are absent entirely from the concert hall, a new kind of concert experience is suggested – one with more embedded interpretive value – as a means of re-engaging with live concerts.

It is increasingly common for conductors, musicians and guest hosts to speak from the stage. The Minnesota Orchestra has observed positive results in terms of audience response when its new music director, Osmo Vänskä, explains a little about why seemingly diverse pieces are put together on the same program. Similar results are reported in Philadelphia. According to Cambron, “Our musicians have been doing it this summer at the Mann Center, and they’re getting excited about it because of the positive feedback.”

If the musicians of the tradition-bound Philadelphia Orchestra are getting excited about introducing pieces and sharing musical insights from the stage, surely the rest of the orchestra field can’t be far behind. What this suggests, moreover, is that the role of the professional musician is expanding. Musicians who can communicate about their art and, ultimately, awaken creative potential in others will find themselves in higher demand.

Let’s hope it’s not another 100 years before the conservatories that train them get the picture. Meanwhile, orchestras that train musicians for the new world, most notably Miami’s New World Symphony, will play a pivotal role in shaping the next generation of musicians and ensembles.

The Atlanta Symphony offers another form of embedded interpretation, in connection with performances of repertoire by living composers. Just prior to performing the piece, the orchestra plays a videotaped interview with the composer, usually lasting four or five

minutes. The idea behind these composer videos is to give the audience a window into the composer's inspiration and creative process, thereby adding interpretive value to the performance that follows. The videos are recorded locally and the interviewing is usually done by ASO conductors Robert Spano or Donald Runnicles. "It helps to humanize the composer," said Frank Dans, the orchestra's artistic administrator. "Generally speaking, audiences have responded well to it."

The Philharmonic Orchestra of New Jersey has trademarked its Discovery Concert format, a concert/lecture experience that involves analyzing a piece of music with orchestra and audience participation, and then playing it again at the end of the program.<sup>9</sup> Music director George Marriner Maull, who conceived the interactive format specifically for adults and teens, develops handouts for the audience highlighting musical themes, rhythms and other interesting aspects of the piece. Audience response has been enthusiastic. In 2003, a television production of the orchestra's *Bach to the Future* Discovery Concert program was released by American Public Television to public television stations across the United States. It later received a 2004 Emmy nomination for Outstanding Performing Arts Program.



*The Concert Companion, a wireless PDA, delivers concert commentary in real time.*

The most revolutionary idea so far for embedded interpretation is the Concert Companion ("CoCo"), a hand-held PDA device connected via a wireless signal to a server in the concert hall.<sup>10</sup> During the concert, CoCo users receive real-time interpretive text synchronized to the music. The information that users read speaks directly to what's happening in the music at that moment – something like interactive program notes, but more concise and evocative. So far, music luminaries Robert Winter and Greg Sandow have authored commentary. Several orchestras, including the Philadelphia Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic and the Pittsburgh Symphony have tested the devices with consumers. In the most recent tests, a real-time streaming video feature was added, allowing users to view a close-up image of the conductor's face.

Consumer reactions to the device have been encouraging. Evaluation results suggest that the Concert Companion experience will appeal to those who prefer a more active learning experience in the concert hall and to those who are comfortable multitasking. The technology is expensive now, and the prospect of writing

CoCo commentary for hundreds of classical music pieces is daunting. But it is only a matter of time before real-time interpretive commentary is available to concertgoers on a regular basis, whether beamed wirelessly to a hand-held device or projected onto a screen above the stage, like supertitles.

What orchestras have learned with certainty is that some people really enjoy embedded interpretation in their concerts, and others really don't. So, offering a choice is key, and

<sup>9</sup>For more information, see [www.ponj.org](http://www.ponj.org).

<sup>10</sup>For more information, see [www.concertcompanion.com](http://www.concertcompanion.com). The Concert Companion was developed under the auspices of the Kansas City Symphony by Roland Valliere, the orchestra's former CEO. Knight Foundation was an early supporter of the project, along with other foundations.



helping audiences opt into their preferred format becomes the central challenge. It will take time – maybe years – for people to figure out which experience they prefer, and under what circumstances.

More research is needed to understand the profile of concertgoers who want more interpretation as opposed to those who don't. Early indications are that the level of experience with classical music is less of an indicator than a desire to learn something new, a sort of gregariousness of mind and a willingness to entrust one's imagination to someone else's subjective view of what's going on in the music. In focus groups, some people exhibit a strongly proprietary sense about their own imagination and instinctively reject what others would tell them about a piece of music. Others happily go along for the ride.

## Adding It All Up

What are we to make of all this? Are these innovative approaches to presenting classical music concerts pieces of a larger puzzle that will rejuvenate the orchestra field, or are they just new footnotes to an old story?

If you consider the backdrop against which these innovations are happening – diversification of musical tastes, demand for more customized, intense experiences, etc. – they make a lot more sense. Intentionally or not, orchestras are responding to the shifting sands of demand by introducing more contextual programming, visual enhancements and embedded interpretation. If the concert experience remains fixed in time and space, the gap between orchestras and their potential audiences will only widen. Thus, the speed and grace with which orchestras diversify their product lines to offer concertgoers a choice of formats, venues and experiences will weigh heavily on the fortunes of the field.

It is encouraging to see innovations bubbling up in a sort of organic process of reinvention. Whether motivated by demand, philanthropy or a personal vision of something new, creative music directors, musicians, artistic planners and even a few marketing directors are slowly reshaping the 19<sup>th</sup> century orchestra concert into a 21<sup>st</sup> century leisure experience. A great deal of interesting work is being done, and more should be encouraged by funders and orchestra leadership.

Much has been written about the increasingly untenable business model of the American orchestra. At the end of the day, however, it all boils down to what's happening on stage – the product. "We're trying everything except playing naked onstage to get people to concerts, instead of dealing with the fundamental problem," programming consultant Mirageas said about artistic planning. "There's no substitute for exquisite good taste on the part of the creator."

If audiences leave the concert hall with a high level of satisfaction and a sense that they are somehow better listeners today than they were yesterday, they will come back,

hopefully, and bring their friends. Rising to this challenge will require orchestras and musicians to embrace the music-loving public at many levels of knowledge and sophistication and to create a range of concert experiences for them. Innovation requires more creativity, not less. More hard work, not less. And more flexibility, trust and willingness to take risks, not less. Fear of compromising artistic standards is always a legitimate concern, but not a reason to abandon work on designing the concert experience of the future.

Mature artists who are in tune with the world around them lead the way in regenerating the constituency for the art form. Michael Tilson Thomas, in his opening address at the 2003 national conference of the American Symphony Orchestra League, recounted how he used to concern himself with the “top of the pyramid” when he was a young conductor – focusing on achieving the highest possible level of artistry. Now, he said, his interest lies also at the “bottom of the pyramid” – opening new doors to welcome more people into the world of classical music and to reconnect with busy or disillusioned audiences.

Innovation is never easy. Leaps forward happen between small steps and the occasional wipeout. As the orchestra field progresses down this pathway, fear of the unknown will gradually lose its grip as more and more musicians, managers, board members and concertgoers come to understand that it is not necessary to sacrifice artistic quality in order to make classical music concerts a little more interesting and appealing to a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience. Reimagining the classical music concert is not about dumbing anything down, but rather smartening it up.

Alan Brown is a researcher and consultant in the nonprofit arts sector. Prior to forming his own consulting practice, Alan served as president of Audience Insight LLC and associate principal of AMS Planning & Research Corp., where he studied audiences, visitors and patterns of cultural participation in almost every major market in the United States. From 2000 to 2002, he directed the *Classical Music Consumer Segmentation Study* for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and 15 orchestras.

Copies of the *Classical Music Consumer Segmentation Study* are available through Audience Insight. To order copies, e-mail [info@audienceinsight.com](mailto:info@audienceinsight.com).

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The orchestras involved in Knight Foundation's symphony initiative include:

Brooklyn Philharmonic	New World Symphony
Charlotte Symphony	Oregon Symphony
Colorado Symphony	Philadelphia Symphony
Detroit Symphony	St. Louis Symphony
Fort Wayne Philharmonic	St. Paul Chamber Orchestra
Kansas City Symphony	San Antonio Symphony
Long Beach Symphony	Wichita Symphony
Louisiana Philharmonic	

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