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ASKING LISTENERS FOR THEIR OPINIONS ABOUT CLASSICAL MUSIC CONCERT PROGRAMS

by David Giovannoni

*Producers should regard research studies as
positive tools instead of negative rules.*

— Ruth Dreier

Audiences have been eavesdropping on classical music concerts via radio since 1921. Unfortunately, programming economics and the radio environment of 1991 conspire against the genre as financial support and station carriage continue their decline. The classical music concert may disappear from radio unless it can prove itself to be – or transposes itself into – a programming element highly valued by stations and their listeners.

Why should a public radio station broadcast a classical music concert? Program directors are equivocal. Some hesitate turning over control of their air to those who may not work within their stations' musical and presentation guidelines. They worry about the effects concert programs have on listeners' use of their stations. At least one station drops selected concert recordings into its regular programming – just as if these recordings were CDs. Other stations refuse to air concerts or concert recordings at all.

Yet there seem to be many inherent advantages to concert programs. They can bring radio listeners to new or obscure works record companies have not yet discovered, or which may be economically unfeasible to release on CD. They can deliver new, fresh, or unique interpretations and performances. They can sparkle with the “electricity” of a live performance and add “spice” to a format

based on compact disk recordings. And their hosts – often more knowledgeable than local talent – can talk with composers, conductors, and performers.

Indeed, in the last few years some producers and hosts have begun experimenting with new concert formats. Many have abandoned literal recreations of the concert experience in favor of more “radiophonic” presentations, understanding that people at home (or in cars or at work) are listening quite differently than those in the concert hall.

Do these experiments work? Is there a future for classical concert programs on radio? More basically, do listeners seek out or perceive the inherent advantages that differentiate concert programs from disk shows?

To my knowledge, American Public Radio is the first organization in modern times to address these questions via the scientific method. Earlier this year, APR played elements of its classical music concerts to over 150 classical music listeners and directly asked them what they thought. Using the EARS[®] method first employed by public radio in 1989 (see “Program and Program Prototype Testing: Public Radio's New Reality” in the compilation *Radio Intelligence, 1988-1990*), classical music listeners responded to presentations selected from

APR's Baltimore, Minnesota, Pittsburgh, and International Music series.

This study reveals clues about the potential of classical music concert programs, and suggests many fruitful areas of future program prototype research.

It Depends

Do listeners distinguish between “needle drop” and “concert hall” presentations? To find out, the study asked,

All in all, if you were given a choice between two classical stations broadcasting in the evening, and if one station were broadcasting a classical orchestra concert program while the other had a disc jockey presenting classical records, which would you prefer?

People who expressed a preference for concerts outnumbered those preferring records by a slight margin. However, well over one-third (37%) of the listeners answered “It would depend.” Among persons between 30 and 49 years of age – those most likely to be NPR news listeners – this number was even greater (45%). In addition, those expressing a strong preference one way or the other were a distinct minority.

In short, classical listeners do not seem to have strong opinions about the source or format of their evening classical music radio programming. They rule out neither needle drop nor concert hall, saying simply “it depends.” But on what does it depend? Is it something in the selection of the music itself? Or is it the performance, the orchestra, the ambiance, the interviews, the host?

Matching Appeals

In the same way that music testing has shown that certain music modes appeal to different types of listeners, this study demonstrates that certain announcing styles also attract and repel different types of listeners.

For instance, in one segment played for listeners Baltimore conductor David Zinman walked into the trombone section and chatted with the first chair about his instrument. This shtick earned high marks among younger listeners and very low marks among older listeners. This difference in response is called “appeal,” and it is precisely the type of information the study set out to find.

Such pointed appeal is okay. Good radio programming strongly attracts some listeners and repels others. What radio programmers must concern themselves with is the *consistency of appeal* across all elements of a program. In this instance, it would be highly productive to follow Zinman's escapade with a musical element that also appealed to younger listeners – that is, if the producer wished to appeal to younger listeners. If not, then the producer would drop the wandering conductor tactic in favor of another that appealed to a different audience constituency.

Music and Talk

In its simplest form, a concert music program comprises two things: music and talk about the music. One thing is clear from this study: people listen because of the music. Music is necessary. But is music sufficient? Concert producers answer “no,” and unfortunately this study stops short of obtaining a clear answer from listeners.

As people listened to selections from concert programs, they responded on this scale:

- 5 Would definitely tune in
- 4 Would stay tuned if already listening
- 3 Would possibly listen if already tuned in
- 2 Would probably tune out
- 1 Would definitely tune out or turn off the radio

For all non-musical elements, responses averaged across the 150 listeners ranged from 2.5 to 3.5 on the scale – that is, people were saying they'd probably listen if already tuned in, but they didn't feel too strong about the non-musical elements one way or the other. But when the orchestras played works by Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Dvorak, and Brahms, the average response increased by a full point; listeners were saying they'd definitely stay tuned, or even definitely tune in, for this music.

No non-musical element was as well received as the music of these masters. (As one pundit observed, “Who's the master here – Beethoven or the announcer?”) Indeed, not all music was as well received. Even with the goodwill generated by an interview with the composer or a build-up by the host, listeners began reaching for their off buttons within seconds of hearing certain compositions.

As the study's analysis concludes, “The first concern of producers must be music selection.” Only certain musical selections induce people to listen, to tune in. In this sense concert programs are no different than music played from disks.

Neither are their non-musical elements. This study experimented with a wide range of styles, interviews, skits, and other presentation modes. Some were more appealing to certain listeners than were others. However, none had the positive impact on

listeners (and we assume, listening) as the musical selections mentioned above.

Given these results, why have a concert music program at all? Why not play only music – specifically, music that doesn't induce tune out – and be done with it?

Added Value

Purveyors of classical concert programs argue that many elements beyond the selection of the music add value to the listener. The information, insights, and interviews delivered by hosts; the live, sparkling performances; the incredible and otherwise unavailable interpretations; these attributes and many others combine to make classical music concerts intellectual and emotional feasts for aficionados and casual listeners alike.

These remain untested assumptions. Clearly, these attributes are important to some listeners some of the time. But how important is each? How many listeners are we talking about? Who are they? Are some of these attributes turning off more listeners than they are turning on? And given the higher cost of this type of programming compared to just playing records, is it worth it in a programming economics sense?

This study takes an excellent first step in asking listeners what they think. More important, it sharpens our ability to frame and to ask these most basic questions of listeners. Much to the credit of Classical Music Director Ruth Dreier, APR is actively seeking support to build upon this study and to ask these difficult questions.

In concert with APR and other distributors, astute producers will use these dialogues with their intended listeners as positive tools in the re-formation of their programming.

Others will deride them as negative rules and decry the restriction of artistic expression.

May the best classical concert programs win.

The RadioMusicWorks study was initiated in 1990 by Eric Friesen of American Public Radio and funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's System Development

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