

Perspectives on PRPD's classical music tests

Study's answers are questionable, and the question aims too low

By Wesley Horner

The Midday Classical Music Testing Project, presented by Public Radio Program Directors at its conference in September, is fundamentally flawed in two ways, casting serious doubt that programmers could draw any useful conclusions from it.

First, the 30-second music excerpts (the proponents refer to them as “sounds” instead of “music”) were played for test listeners completely without context. Missing in action were virtually all the factors a music programmer needs to take into account to work intelligently and creatively.

Second, the testing environment itself—an auditorium setting nothing like a typical listening environment—means we don't know anything about how respondents might behave in real-life listening. It is akin to studying sharks in an aquarium: Their behavior is completely different in the open ocean, where credible information could be gleaned.

The PRPD study, funded by CPB, is presented as a tool for programmers seeking to bring more midday listeners to classical music.

If the question is “What CDs should I play in midday?,” however, the study does not provide the answer.

For years, we've approached the challenge of classical music on public radio by rearranging the deck chairs. Now we're given a study that promises to analyze listeners' gut reactions to the *color* of the deck chairs, unaware that the listeners are already clambering down the ladders to lifeboats with names like Time Warner Cable and iTunes.

More troubling for public radio's long-term survival in the cultural arena is that while we tinker with selecting one CD over

others, we avoid tackling larger issues—not only in classical music but also in jazz and folk.

It would be far more valuable in the long run to invest our creative energies to give public radio a proactive role in the nation's cultural life, using radio's intrinsic strengths as a medium and public radio's particular missions and capabilities.

Music in context

In the PRPD project's music testing, listeners to the 30-second music excerpts were given no context for listening, as if every day and every place were like every other. Their reactions were unaffected by any of the contextual factors a qualified programmer takes into account when choosing what music to broadcast when, and how to present it.

A good music programmer asks, “What factoid or mini-roadmap would introduce the piece so listeners will want to hear more? What is the mood of the nation and the news, of the season and the weather? What will my listeners be doing at the time?” (Presumably they won't be sitting in an auditorium with other respondents, as the test subjects were, undistracted by driving, writing, mowing the lawn, eating or ironing.) “What holidays are approaching? Has this performer been in the news recently? What trust have I or my station developed with the audience over time? How much music from this time period, including this piece, have we aired recently? What are competing stations airing right now?”

Perhaps most important are the adjacencies. What music will come before and after? As in most arts, context is everything in choosing music. The color red looks and feels a lot different adjacent to

green than next to orange. A Bach partita will be understood differently if it follows Copland instead of a Gregorian chant.

If they wanted to tell us something useful, or at least credible, why didn't the researchers test reactions to an entire piece of music with different introductions and different pieces before and after? With listeners who are driving, cooking, playing Scrabble or working?

The sound of music

Music is, by definition, a sequence of sounds arranged to tell a story in a non-verbal language. What can we learn from test responses to sounds removed from their original contexts? Is that any more useful than, for example, testing listeners' reactions to random words, sentences or paragraphs from a radio documentary?

To transliterate the study results into a blueprint for music programming would be a stretch. Clumsy attempts to do so could result in extreme niche programming or a constricted or national playlist (or “do-not-play” list”).

We ought to remember what happened with commercial radio's headlong plunge into extreme niche programming (“music of the '70s”): zero audience loyalty, disappearing audiences.

If listeners like grilled cheese sandwiches, does that mean we should serve *only* grilled cheese sandwiches all the time? Some programmers, I fear, will draw that conclusion. Others will vary the menu with cheese omelets, cheese soufflés, macaroni and cheese, and cheesecake. But why not be more inventive? After the cheese course, you might serve ratatouille. Consider juxtapositions carefully and present your buffet artfully with variety, complementary flavors and surprises. Surely that is a strategy more likely to result in long-term loyalty and less listener fatigue.

Real-world listening

The sounds tested in the PRPD study are not only ripped out of their musical contexts but out of the real listening settings.

Test-drive this car, the proponents say, but don't take it out of the showroom. Take a whiff of the interior, and on that basis, tell us whether it's the car for you.

Is public radio capable of designing background music services in classical, jazz and other art music—"tracks to relax," as one commercial classical station describes it? Sure. Probably pretty good ones. But that is programming that is not particularly memorable and, more dangerously, easily replaceable. Various commercial entities already offer palliative formulations—XM Satellite Radio, for example. Listeners also can do it for themselves, downloading favorite tunes and clicking the random-shuffle button.

We, on the other hand, can aspire higher in our approach to music programming and in the process create a different strategy for survival and long-term public service.

Intelligent fine-tuning of music selection and presentation is part of the job for good music programmers. But public radio's work in music barely begins there.

For the future, aim higher

In news programming, public radio connects listeners with the world, events, people and ideas. Those are the hallmarks of our brand.

In music programming, with notable exceptions, we have created dissonance with that brand. For news, our correspondents travel the world to understand it. For music, we rely on two inadequate formats: spinning CDs, which are now widely available on other platforms; and broadcasting concert recordings produced in much the same way they've been produced for decades. To continue to rely primarily on those two concepts ignores public radio's greater potential.

Let's design well-financed, regularly scheduled art music programs—classical, jazz and folk—with the same high-level production values we ask of our news and information programs. Let's demand of our cultural programs the qualities we expect of all our programs, that they convey a sense of immediacy, story, event and connection with real people and ideas.

Our experience with highly produced, well-financed national news programs demonstrates that if stations also had

strong flagship national music programs to choose from, local music service could be upgraded. Staff would have fewer on-air hours to fill and more time to concentrate on well-produced local music. We might then resolve at last the dissonance between the quality of our news and information programs and the quality of our music programming.

What to do?

Let's begin by admitting the weaknesses and limitations of the PRPD Classical Music study. If your broadcast music mix isn't working, hire a music director with chops, imagination and the leadership skills to inspire good on-air presentation.

Second, let's decide: Is there a proactive role for public radio in America's cultural life, based on a marriage of public radio and art music?

Third, let's do what we in public radio have done so successfully in news—invest in national production centers and flagship programs that fulfill public radio's core values. It's not difficult to imagine that such equivalent centers for public radio music would produce programs that are more memorable, more talked about, and more nationally and locally engaging than the alternative of spinning CDs, no matter how carefully selected.

What if, with our collective resources and imagination, public radio had a destination jazz production center in St. Louis, or a national center for classical music in New York? Might water-cooler conversations be variations on: "Did you hear what Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg did on *John Schaeffer* last night?"

What if public radio partnered with Jazz at Lincoln Center or another powerful cultural institution to create a national live daily showcase of world-class jazz artists? Boston-based *From the Top*, which carved out a weekly niche packed with performance, information and entertainment, is an example of what a deep portfolio of cultural programming might include.

WXPN's *World Café* in Philadelphia demonstrates how a program can engage with musicians, local and national listeners

to create a community of common musical interests. If only it were significantly better financed to produce even more broadcast and nonbroadcast programming.

The new NPR Music website, as exciting as it is, relegates our innovation in musical presentation to the Internet and underlines our shortage of flagship cultural programs on the air. It would be putting the cart before the horse, except that we have no horse. In broadcasting, public radio has abandoned its highest expressions of its core values to news. Imagine if public radio's cultural side developed the variety of strong brand-name programs and talent that we now offer as a public service in news and information.

We need leadership—requests for proposals—from funders and program distributors for cultural programs that engage world-class musical talent and listeners on a national scale. We need imagination at the local station level to demand and embrace quality national flagship music programs.

If we aspire only to public radio music programming as a sedative assemblage of likeable "sounds," ignoring our intelligence and substituting a formula for our creative gifts, then surely we have failed our mission, our mandate and our potential. We in public radio can be more. We can ask better questions of ourselves, aim higher, and reinvent cultural programming, moving beyond fiddling with the window dressing. Let's instead create magnets for talent on both sides of the microphone, put public radio in a leadership position in the music world, and use our particular approach to radio to distinguish ourselves from the competition. ■

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