

Did You Hear That?

The challenge of programming concerts lies in how we really listen.

by John Mauceri

I am a small participant in the histories of some 50 different orchestras around the world. Gustav Meier, fresh from the Vienna Academy where he had been trained by the legendary Hans Swarowski—himself a student of Schoenberg, Webern, Weingartner, and Richard Strauss—taught me my technique. Leonard Bernstein taught me about heart. Leopold Stokowski taught me about invention and discovery. Carlo Maria Giulini, whom I knew the least, was equally important as a spiritual mentor. My very first maestro was Arturo Toscanini—on NBC television. A lot of what I have to say is based on what I have seen and heard, what I have experienced as a guest, and what I developed in the three venues where I spent years creating something new and unusual. That “something” also turned out to be consistently successful, even though the challenges at each were quite different.

It all began in 1968 when I was appointed music director of the Yale Symphony Orchestra. The challenge was not simply about getting an audience. It was about creating an orchestra and justifying its existence. While Yale was perfectly happy to have an undergraduate orchestra play a few concerts in the 800-seat Sprague Hall, it was an under-funded and totally extracurricular organization. People would play in it because they *wanted* to play in it. They could earn money in the New Haven Symphony. They could get credit in the Yale Collegium. The only reason to play in the Yale Symphony was the pleasure of being in an orchestra—something we do not hear much about in our professional lives.

This, then, was the double challenge:

find an orchestra and find an audience. And my budget was \$6,000 for the year.

We decided that the orchestra should play in the 2,500-seat Woolsey Hall, rather than Sprague. I knew it would be uplifting and it said “The Big Time.” But even 1,000 people in Woolsey Hall would look like an empty house. We took that risk. I created an imaginary season of six concerts, putting the first one on Parents’ Weekend, since every member of the orchestra would have roommates and most of them would have parents and siblings and this would give the false impression that we actually had an audience. If the concert was good all those students might come back for the second concert and tell their friends so that we wouldn’t miss their parents. I took half of our budget to make posters, and here’s why:

I had enough confidence in my imaginary orchestra, and in the music I had yet to choose, to believe that once we had people in their seats, the rest would take care of itself. In other words, we had to make the concert *look* like it was going to be the greatest don’t-miss-it event on campus. I went to the Art and Architecture School and got their two best graduate students to share the responsibilities of designing a series of silk-screened posters. With the paper donated, all we had to pay for was the printing.

But a poster of what? Here’s a case where the tail *can* be seen as wagging the dog, but it was more like the tail inspiring the dog to bark.

I have always suspected that Western music was in some way a series of sonic metaphors for the visual and emotional world. That is its unique nature. Other musical systems are spiritual or mood-changing or simply the medium for words—words that are not described but rather are presented. Some music dazzles us with the complexity of its rhythms, but Western music is attached to the perceived world and the human experience. It wants to describe them, even if that description is more a simulacrum of the process of solving a riddle or taking a journey. In other words, Western music is expressing a visual/emotional metaphor when it is something called *The Firebird* as well as when it is Symphony in C-minor.

I also knew that a visual common denominator could express the musical common denominator, but only if the program actually had one. I drew inspiration from my studies of information theory and what I knew about how we listen and what we actually hear. Work in these fields has gone a lot further since 1968, but theories of language and information were a hot topic then.

Here’s the point: The brain will define certain parameters shortly into

the concert experience. Loud and soft will define each other. That is pretty obvious. Anyone who has been to a rock concert, or certain Broadway shows, knows that after the first jolt of sound, the ear closes up to accept the extraordinarily high decibel levels bombarding it. Conversely, an acoustic guitar recital requires the ear to adjust in the other direction, so that a sudden strumming can sound earthshakingly loud. There can be no such thing as *mezzo-forte* without something louder or softer. Silence redefines the ear’s playing field and is the



John Mauceri conducts the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra, which he served as founding director.

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most powerful tool for a conductor in live concerts. As a silence is prolonged, the ear returns to its neutral position. At the same time, an audience's attention suddenly coalesces. The end of the first part of *The Rite of Spring* is a good example. On a smaller scale, the *fermata* on the silences in the first bars of Verdi's overture to *La forza del destino* concentrates and unifies the audience's attention—not only because it is preceded by something quite loud, but because the silence is required to be out of time—long enough to get attention and not too long to lose the tension of the expression.

More important to the discussion of perception, however, is the density and speed of information that is transmitted to the audience and the ability of the human brain to process that information. Simply put: If you play a Beethoven overture, follow it with a densely non-tonal—and probably unknown—piece, and then play Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony, no one will actually hear your concert. Each audience member will like one of these three pieces, sleep through another, and be moderately interested in the third; and it does not follow which response will go with which piece. That is a function of a million different issues brought to the concert by each individual person sitting out there in the dark. And anyway, I believe we want to create a unified and positive response to the totality of our concerts. When an audience becomes a single entity, the power of live performance is evident and its function becomes a quintessential societal act—one that will never disappear from the earth as long as humans populate it. That's very good news for people who run orchestras.

And so with all of the above in mind I decided to create programs that had a common denominator from which a visual image could be derived (that was for the poster) and a content that was sensitive to the issue of density and speed of the information contained in the music itself.

An obvious example would be a Spanish night: In reality, that's the music influenced by the Islamic period of Southern Spain, but what we call "Spanish." For the Yale concert, we used Spain as an entry point to a certain sound, so that French and American composers were admitted.

Our designer took a black and white print of *The Naked Maja*, put the concert information in small, red block print in the corners of the page, and had us tape a plastic red rose on the naked woman's mouth. The posters were stolen and hung in hundreds of Yale Undergraduate bedrooms and Woolsey Hall was packed. At first my colleagues were upset that the posters were being stolen. "On the contrary," I suggested, "The Yale Symphony's presence has now become part of those students' lives."

In the Mix

A number of years ago we created a Cuban night at the Hollywood Bowl. Many contemporary Cuban-born composers write in a style that can only be called post-Webern-

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ian, and while that is truly interesting, it was not possible to mix it into our program without this music going unheard within the context of the other pieces and the expectation of the audience. It would have been a superficial victory at best. Instead we found a vast and fascinating repertoire, after a number of false starts, in the music *influenced* by the many dance forms invented in Cuba by its African slaves. Thus the mambo, habanera, and bolero of non-Cuban composers held the musical language of the concert together, celebrated the culture of Cuba, and was the basis of an enormously successful program.

This is an extremely important point in so-called thematic programming. Announcing a program built around a title that will achieve no musical coherence will always be less successful than one that does. The concert can include surprises, but it must fulfill expectations—and exceed them.

Here's a slightly more sophisticated use of the idea. In 1969 we performed two rather radical programs at Yale. The first was Bruckner's Ninth Symphony, which had never been performed in New Haven.

I knew that the work would be a real challenge, not only because of its epic length, but also its quiet ending—a time-stopping E-major chord.

In 1969 this music was rarely performed except in a few cities. Many of those who did know it from recordings found the music boring and repetitive. That Bruckner's musical language is built on long sentences that then repeat without color change but rather with variants of keys is a fact. How can we make the best case for this music? I decided to play a single work before the symphony to prepare the audience for the informational environment of Bruckner.

What we played was the Prelude and Concert Ending to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. It represents a musical forerunner of Bruckner's language. It takes up about thirteen-and-a-half minutes, which also sets up the time dimensions of each of Bruckner's three movements. Its speed and information densities would be congruent with the Bruckner. The concert, while short in terms of standard concert length, required the audience's attention for a total of 73 minutes, which is hardly short.

Now here too was another reason to choose this work. It is in A-major. The Bruckner is in D-minor and its final bars conclude in E-major. The opening of Bruckner's last movement refers to the opening of *Tristan*, and therefore in the context of this program, that new theme is heard by the audience as a mysterious echo, a pseudo-recapitulation of the first piece on the concert. The program becomes a new piece of music, unimagined by either of its composers and a unique journey for the audience. That is a fundamental point: A concert is a new piece of music.

There were seven years of completely full concerts at Yale. The vast majority of the repertoire was music by living composers. These concerts included the American premiere of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Hymnen*, which we staged outdoors with 1,000 performers, including the Yale Aviation Squadron and believe me, there wasn't a single person on campus at that time who didn't know who Stockhausen was—and this includes John Kerry, Bill and Hillary Clinton, and George W. Bush.

The point of all of this was engagement of my public with comprehensible and incredibly popular concerts. Comprehensibility is an essential ingredient in the creative process. By creative process, I mean the process of imagining the concert in the first place, and the process the audience goes through in agreeing to go on the journey with us.

With the creation of the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra in 1991, we were able to develop some of these ideas in another and vastly different venue. An outdoor amphitheater with 18,000 seats to fill is an enormous challenge. As with the Yale Symphony, I knew we had to justify our existence. What would this new orchestra play? And how could we find our audience?

What seemed obvious to me then is that this new orchestra should play the music



John Mauceri

written in its home city. Even though Los Angeles has been a principal source of orchestral music since around 1930, no one in Los Angeles had actually thought of doing this. Perhaps it would be more honest to say, no one thought it valuable to do this.

Whenever possible, we should find ways to link the works we are playing with the lives of the people we are playing it for. Ownership is a powerful feeling. When I announced to the 12,000 people at the Hollywood Bowl who had come to hear *La Bohème* that the American premiere of this opera had taken place in Los Angeles, the audience applauded. *They applauded themselves*, because with this knowledge they could take a little bit of ownership of a European masterpiece first heard a hundred years before, at Turin's Teatro Regio in 1896. It was—at that

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in 1949, tell them that when Richard Strauss was born, Abraham Lincoln was President of the United States and when he died, the post was held by Harry Truman. Or, if one wants to think globally, say that Richard Strauss was born before the invention of the light bulb and died after the dropping of the first atomic bomb.

Never Underestimate

For the sake of this discussion, let's try a new model for audiences: Let's think of them as smart. When they don't come back, it just might have to do with what we are presenting.

I recently attended a concert in another city with an orchestra that presented a newly composed work as the first half of a program. The lights dimmed, and on a video screen the composer appeared and gave us an introduction to her work.

I was struck by this, because while it was good to hear a friendly, articulate voice and to see that the composer was a woman, she did say something about liking to write for the string section because (and I paraphrase here) "the strings can pluck their strings, which is called *pizzicato*, or draw their bows across the strings, which is called *arco*." She also announced that "there are 58,000 notes

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in my score and if you miss any of them, I'll be in the lobby signing CDs and you can tell me what you thought of my piece. I hope you enjoy it."

The next day, I was watching the Masters Tournament on television and wondering what the equivalent of that video would be. I imagined Tiger Woods looking at the camera and saying, "Golf is a fun game, because you hit a small white ball with a stick, which is called a club, and the object of the game is to get the ball in a hole which is pretty far away. And the really cool thing about golf is that it's the lowest score that wins!! Well, I've got to go now and I hope you enjoy the game!"

People are really smart. They write amazingly perceptive comments on CNN's Cafferty File. They understand complex levels of parody and satire when they tune in to watch Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart on Comedy Central. They do Sunday crossword puzzles with a ballpoint pen. Every day hundreds of thousands of people spend a small fortune going to athletic events and can follow the

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And if you think kids have short attention spans, I would remind you of the millions of children who have stayed up all night reading the gigantic and complex novels of J.K. Rowling; I would remind you of the teenagers and their parents who will sit through a three-and-a-half-hour film based on a single volume of the *three-volume Lord of the Rings* and then happily buy the CDs, played by the London Philharmonic, and then purchase the extended DVD of the very same material. And when your orchestra played the two-hour-long symphony based on this music (which I am proud to have suggested in the first place and then edited for Howard Shore) you have most certainly broken attendance records for a new symphonic work. In its first two-and-a-half years, this symphony has had 100 performances before a combined audience of a quarter of a million people throughout the world.

It is a serious mistake to make your audiences feel stupid simply because *they* do not like the music you like.

At the Hollywood Bowl we have programmed non-tonal music on the weekends by Peter Maxwell Davies, Alberto Ginastera, John Adams, Arnold Schoenberg, and György Ligeti. Ligeti's *Atmosphères* is a good case in point. We have played it three times during the past fifteen years. That means that some 40,000 people have heard this work at the Bowl. The fact that it was played in the context of movie nights or science fiction nights confronts each of us. Were these performances less important, less serious, less valuable because they were put in a context that made the work accessible?

A number of years ago, I was conducting *Peter Grimes* at the Michigan Opera Theatre. I read an ad in the local newspaper placed by the Detroit Symphony. There were two different programs that week. Jerry Goldsmith was doing something called "Pops Goes to Hollywood" and Music Director Neeme Järvi was conducting the classical series that featured *The Pines of Rome*. It occurred to me that while we all know the Respighi is as close to a classic movie score as anything in the symphonic repertory, if Jerry included music from *Planet of the Apes* on his program, the only atonal music played in

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— *Rebecca Doffy*



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Detroit that week was on the pops series.

Atonal and twelve-tone music is not a problem for general audiences. Electronic music is not a problem for audiences. The general public has been hearing it, and accepting it, since the 1930s in film scores. Its accessibility and acceptability has everything to do with context as well as quality. In a few years we will celebrate the centenary of atonal music, followed a decade later by the centenary of the twelve-tone system. It is not avant-garde. It is not contemporary. *It is a hundred years old.* Like music in any style, some of it is very good and a few works are masterpieces. Period.

Movie music is not a genre of music. It is a delivery system whereby every kind of music is presented to mega-millions of people. What differentiates it from other music is its frequent requirement to fit within a specific and pre-existing amount of time to do whatever it needs to do. Great music written for the cinema is great music. Most music written for the cinema,

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like all those forgotten symphonies, string quartets, operas and ballets, is not. However, it undervalues it and insults the composers as well as the audience to play it only with other Movie Music, which usually means short tunes excerpted from film scores. Imagine if we did that with so-called classical composers, as a way of representing symphonic music. It would be a concert that started with the theme from *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, followed by the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (minus the development section), the second movement of Mozart's K. 467, "Goin' Home," the theme from the *Moon-*

light Sonata arranged by your librarian, and ending with the last five minutes of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and (to save money and maximize profits) with the chorus part played on a synthesizer...and all done on one rehearsal!

Quantum Universe

When I was first invited to conduct Leipzig's Gewandhaus Orchestra, seven years ago, I was asked to bring music from Hollywood composed by those Germans who had fled the Nazi era and who had brought their European-trained genius to a new medium: sound film. Although my first program was exclusively music written for Hollywood films, I soon began programming concerts that *included* film music, but were based around some idea, like Love and Death, Time and Space, Two Worlds, Big and Little Heroes. At the center of all these concerts was the music of Richard Wagner. There are two reasons for this. The first is that Wagner was born in Leipzig. The second is that, according to Max Steiner—the composer of *Gone with the Wind* and a student of Gustav Mahler—it was Wagner who invented movie music. Steiner was only half-kidding. In Wagner's time, critics of his *Ring of the Nibelungen* accused him of writing scenery rather than music.

It is perhaps useful to be reminded that we frequently program ballet music—without the dancers—in our concerts. And yet ballet music is ordered up by the bar, as Tchaikovsky well knew. The entire score of *The Sleeping Beauty* was written to a matrix given to him by a choreographer. The point is that the geniuses in any genre or delivery system fulfill the requirements and then transcend the limitations to create great art. Michelangelo was refused the blue paint he absolutely needed for the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He ultimately got the paint, one pope later, but only for the "Last Judgment" altarpiece. And both works are masterpieces, with or without the can of lapis lazuli paint.

Film music is a key to unlocking the hearts and minds of today's audience. There is much great music written for the medium. Much of it is incredibly complex and difficult, and we do it a major disservice when we program it to be played on

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one rehearsal and only in the context of the dreaded pops concert.

Over the years I have written and spoken about the need to create and teach new models to explain the musical history of the 20th century. The current philosophy borrows from Darwin and Hegel and projects a system in which all roads lead to Pierre Boulez: We can take the German or the French/Russian route. So it is either Wagner-Mahler-Schoenberg-Webern-Boulez or it is Wagner-Debussy-Stravinsky-Messiaen-Boulez. But this model leaves out 90 percent of the music written, performed, and loved in the century. And it always assumes a battle and a victory of the more complex form. This theoretical model is joined by another devastating view not only of music but also of the universe itself: It's called duality. Certain famous Greek philosophers and early Christian fathers embraced the idea. Your computers are built on it. On/Off, Yes/No, Night/Day, O/1, Good/Evil, Spiritual/Corporeal, Absolute Music/Program Music, Popular/Serious.

The wonderful news is that with the discovery of quantum physics, duality is fast being thrown out and replaced by the weird and hard-to-predict world of quantum maybes. It's a world in which effective complexities need not accumulate to be more effective than the parent.

And so the weird behavior of the Quantum Universe might explain why Arnold Schoenberg lived across the street from Shirley Temple's house on Rockingham Drive in Brentwood, California. An understanding of non-accumulating complexities could also explain why Schoenberg wrote so much great tonal music *after* he had discovered and developed the twelve-tone system. This was not aberrant behavior caused by old age, a desire to be loved, or a desperate and embarrassing attempt to make money in the American cultural desert. On the contrary, it was what Schoenberg actually wanted to do—and it makes perfect sense in a Quantum Universe. How many of our great composers—Strauss, Copland, Weill, Hindemith, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Shostakovich—went through a musical tantrum phase and then simplified and purified their styles?

If we also reject the dualism of popular

versus serious, we can also hear a continuum of influence between Arnold Schoenberg and his great friend, George Gershwin. Between Charlie Parker and Paul Hindemith. Between Franz Waxman and Dmitri Shostakovich.

Physicists, like Seth Lloyd in his extraordinary book, *Programming the Universe*, now take for granted that there are parallel universes—the “multiverse”—or “other worlds” we cannot see but sometimes sense. Their new models show the universe as a giant thing that computes. In it, there are only three possible operations in generating information, and they are: and, not, and copy. What a wonderful way to view the history of music: thousands of years of human expression that can be described as additions to what already exists, the rejection of some elements that already exist, and the passing on of traditions: and, not, copy. Now when we study the nature of language, as I did in 1968, we are actually studying the language of nature.

Hindemith tried to explain it that way in the first half of the 20th century and so, in 1619, did Johannes Kepler—who, not surprisingly, was the subject of Hindemith’s last great opera, *Die Harmonie der Welt* (*The Harmony of the Universe*). Our exclusionary music theorists of the 1960s used pseudo-mathematics to make fun of Hindemith. I firmly believe that music is not only an expression of a great natural system, one that exists in our physical universe and reflects its laws, but one that can co-exist in the multiverse—unhearable, unpredicted, but always recognized and welcomed. It’s how Charles Ives differentiated the unknown from the in-known. For me, that is when music, whatever the style, whatever the genre, and whatever the complexity, becomes the divine excuse to experience the multiverse. Simply put, it’s what we call “a great performance.” ∞

John Mauceri is newly appointed chancellor of the North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem and is the founding director of the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra. This article is adapted from a presentation given during the American Symphony Orchestra League’s 61st National Conference, June 1, 2006 in Los Angeles.

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