

Perspectives on PRPD's classical music tests

Casual, serious listeners agree on sounds of music: some you love to hear

By Peter Dominowski

You turn on the radio . . . you hear classical music . . . you think: Is this in a major or minor key? From the Baroque or Classical era? Does it use period or modern instruments? Who is the conductor? What do I think of the interpretation? The recording quality? Then, after carefully considering all of these variables, you decide whether to stay tuned.

Actually, that's not the way it works, according to findings of PRPD's National Midday Classical Music Research. Some broadcasters may choose music that way, but it's markedly different from the way most listeners decide whether to listen to classical music or tune out.

Most listeners to classical music radio decide whether or not to listen based primarily on the sound and the emotional impact of the music, not on technical or musicological aspects of the music.

Stations that concentrate on the sound and emotional impact of music in their programming, in other words, are more likely to increase listening by aligning their music-selection process with the way most listeners decide whether to listen.

We know from much other research that listeners regularly tune in and out and do not always pay close attention to the announcing. Therefore, if the sound of the music does not appeal to listeners, no amount of background or contextual information from the announcer will persuade most of them to stay tuned.

309 pairs of ears

With a grant from CPB, PRPD conducted music listening tests to give music programmers a clearer understanding of

listener preferences for midday—the prime time for music listening, the time with the greatest potential for increased listening.

We conducted tests in Iowa City/Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Washington, D.C.; Tampa, Fla.; and Sacramento, Calif.—areas chosen to represent the variety of station types, formats and market sizes. All 309 listeners in the sample were listeners to classical music radio in middays—weekdays between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. Respondents with handheld response units listened and immediately registered their opinions on 150 diverse, 30-second music samples.

After our test audiences responded to the musical sounds, we convened a panel of p.d.'s and music directors from the dozen stations involved in the project. The panel created English-language descriptions of the most and least appealing sounds (box, page B4).

The listeners in the tests were not neophytes. Most listened to classical music on the radio for five or more hours a week, have done so for more than 20 years and considered it “very important” in their lives.

This method of testing listener response to music is neither controversial nor out of the ordinary. It has been used successfully by music stations for more than 25 years.

When asked after the testing whether they felt their responses truly reflected their midday classical radio listening experience, our respondents were certain that it did.

The most meaningful factor dividing these listeners, we found, is whether they think of themselves as “serious” or “casual” classical listeners. They classified themselves as one or the other; it was not determined by membership status, time spent listening, loyalty or any other statistical audience analysis.

Self-identified **serious** listeners were

more often male than female, slightly older than “casual” listeners. They more often reported being donors to public radio and believing that classical music was “very important” in their lives. Most have listened to classical radio for 30 years or more and indicated they were “very knowledgeable” about music.

Casual listeners were more often female, slightly younger. A slight majority were not public radio members when tested. Fewer said classical music was very important in their lives, though still a majority. Most have listened to classical radio 20 years or longer. They rated themselves “somewhat knowledgeable” on the subject.

What appeals in music?

It cannot be over-emphasized that this research tested sounds, *not* individual pieces of music. The findings will not become a list of “approved” pieces. We are not suggesting that each station select identical music.

We were seeking to learn the characteristics of music that are most and least appealing so that programmers, rather than “flying blind,” can understand the impact of their midday selections and know what mixes will achieve their stations' missions.

Stations must make decisions based on their own priorities. Those that wish to target their music programming primarily toward serious or casual listeners, or both, now have feedback from listeners to help them do so.

The full report is posted at www.prpd.org/classicaltest/classmustest.htm.

While the research discovered some differences between the musical preferences of serious and casual listeners, the key point is that many of the sounds appeal to both. Indeed, there is little difference between the groups in how they rank the sounds. The most appealing ones were appealing to both serious and casual listeners. The most negative were negative to both. Not every enjoyable piece of music will have every appealing sound, but the more of those characteristics it has, the more it will appeal to people. Relatively few sounds were truly polarizing—rated high by the serious listeners and low by the casual.

The findings free us of any lingering as-

sumptions that music from certain eras or with certain types of instrumentation are to be avoided. Selecting music with broad appeal need not result in programming that sounds the same.

This research should not be taken to imply that any piece is artistically better or worse than others. But for radio listening, which is a very different listening experience than attending a concert, there are some musical characteristics that appeal to most listeners and others that repel most of them. Stations that wish to increase their audience service will benefit by adopting these findings.

Many stations wish to accomplish multiple objectives with their classical music programming, such as providing information about the artists or composers, or promoting cultural events. Unless they play music that appeals to listeners, however, their audience will depart, along with the opportunity to accomplish those other priorities!

Why listen to midday music?

While most of the research involved reacting to music, respondents also answered a series of questions about important characteristics of midday music listening to help us understand listeners' underlying motivation.

Listeners indicated that the most important reasons to listen to midday classical music were:

- to be entertained, and
- to relax or relieve stress.

These were considered important by more than 70 percent of the serious listeners and of the casual listeners—far and away the most frequent motivations for listening to classical music during midday.

The other primary motivations for listening, important to 50 percent or more of listeners, were:

- to feel inspired,
- to learn something about the music, and
- to escape from the pressures of the world.

It is significant that four of these five reasons for listening to classical music involve emotional rather than intellectual responses to music. This strongly validates

Most appealing musical sounds tested

- ♪ Melodic (tuneful)
- ♪ Bright
- ♪ Consistent dynamic range
- ♪ Has 'forward motion'
- ♪ Pleasant
- ♪ Uplifting
- ♪ Familiar (feel)
- ♪ Hummable, singable, danceable
- ♪ Moderate to up-tempo
- ♪ Symmetrical pattern
- ♪ Consonant harmony
- ♪ Clarity

Least appealing musical sounds tested

- ♪ Dissonant (nontraditional harmonies)
- ♪ Unstructured
- ♪ Extreme dynamic range
- ♪ Frantic or aggressive
- ♪ Dark
- ♪ Demanding
- ♪ Anxiety-inducing
- ♪ Dense / shouting
- ♪ Overwrought
- ♪ Hyper-virtuosity without melody
- ♪ Not in the classical 'mold'
- ♪ Lack of forward motion
- ♪ 'Schmaltzy Pops'
- ♪ Extremely quiet or sparse
- ♪ Lack of melody

Source: PRPD study

the findings of the PRPD Core Values of Classical Music studies of 2002 and 2004. While they appreciate the inspiration and learning that they get from music, serious and casual listeners alike rate entertainment and stress relief as their key listening motivators.

Stations often assume that serious listeners are more difficult to please than casual listeners based on audience feedback they typically receive. The research suggests the opposite: Serious listeners enjoy a much wider range of music, both familiar and unfamiliar, than casual listen-

ers do. There is no evidence that playing the most "accessible" music is a negative for any significant number of listeners. The most "popular" music was even more highly rated by serious than casual listeners.

Serious listeners' acceptance of a wide range of music suggests that many of those who complain about the programming of accessible music are not representative of "serious listeners" and that their musical tastes are far from those of most listeners.

These "ultra-serious" listeners fail to distinguish the difference between programming for the radio and for the concert hall. They may love classical music and view themselves as principled defenders of art, but if stations bow to their definition of good programming, it may result in their loving classical music to death.

Ear training

This research identifies a very wide range of sounds that appeal to both serious and casual classical listeners. Stations that want to make classical music a part of the lives of more listeners can use these tools to make informed programming decisions that will lead to increased audience service. In the process, no listeners need be left out.

To help programmers understand which sounds are most and least appealing, PRPD has posted audio files of the tested sounds on its website, www.prpd.org. Understanding the results requires listening to these samples. This sort of ear training will help music programmers evaluate which pieces of music are likely to appeal to their target audiences and which are likely to make them tune out.

Of course, most classical compositions include a wide range of sounds. The art of programming using these findings requires understanding how well the overall feel of a piece fits what listeners want in midday radio.

Applying the research results will allow stations to maintain the loyalty of serious listeners while increasing the schedule's appeal to casual listeners, keeping them tuned in longer and possibly converting some to core listeners and donors.

Bernard Holland, a classical music critic for *The New York Times*, recently observed

Picking and evaluating the music

Twelve varied classical music stations participated in every phase of the research project: WITF, Harrisburg, Pa.; WUSF, Tampa, Fla.; KBIA, Columbia, Mo.; KBPS, Portland, Ore.; WQED, Pittsburgh; KVNO, Omaha, Neb.; KXPR, Sacramento, Calif.; WDAV, Charlotte/Davidson, N.C.; WETA, Washington, D.C.; Iowa Public Radio; WKSU, Cleveland/Akron/Kent, Ohio; and WGUC, Cincinnati. Frank Dominguez, p.d. of WDAV, describes one of the stations' roles.

By Frank Dominguez

Project researchers and representatives from the partner stations met early in the process to discuss what would be tested. We wanted to select a broad range of sounds that would represent the variety of music found on classical radio.

Since the assembled stations take various approaches music programming, the challenge was to agree on a set of sound categories relevant to the greatest number of stations. While some categories were defined conventionally as Chamber Music or Solo Piano, for example, others identified specific sound quali-

ties such as Loud/Driving Orchestral, Quiet/Contemplative or Mystical.

We agreed to include some categories believed to appeal to listeners but not generally associated with classical radio, such as Americana, Crossover and Movie Music.

In each category samples represent the range of sounds found in that category. In World Music, for example, they range from a fairly traditional segment from Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble to an Indian raga by Ravi Shankar.

To ensure the integrity of the testing, the participants were advised to add sounds they expected to test positively (Well Known Melodies, for instance) or negatively (Dissonant Music). The results reinforced the credibility of other listener responses for which we didn't have clear expectations.

Stations involved in the research were united in the belief that it would improve audience service by acquainting programmers with listeners' preferences. By respecting listeners' preferences, stations can increase the amount of time listeners spend with them. This is good for both the stations and classical music as a whole. It is the crucial starting point in building a relationship of mutual trust and benefit between stations and their listeners. ■

that "any music intended for public consumption must ask on every page: 'How can I make (the audience) respond? What common denominator between their sensibility and mine can I discover?' Haydn and Mozart—purveyors of the most profound and original music ever written—asked these questions every day, or they would have had nothing to eat."

Though Holland was writing about composers of new music, his words apply equally well to classical programming on radio, which must make emotional connections with its listeners if it is to remain viable in the 21st century and beyond. ■

Peter Dominowski, president of Market Trends Research Inc., is project manager of the PRPD classical music research; author of national studies on local news programming and Internet usage; and a former p.d. in Chicago (WFMT) and Orlando (WMFE). He is also a partner with Scott Williams and Tim Emmons in Strategic Programming Partners, which conducts the Morning Edition Grad School sessions and advises stations and producers. Dominowski recently relocated from Florida to Lyons, Colo.