

# In life, music has a special place. It should in radio

By David Duff

**H**ow does one make the case for music on public radio? As we've just passed the 40th anniversary of the bill that established public radio, I find it disconcerting that our stations are dropping music as a format more often than they add it.

For much of its existence, public radio was the place to go for diverse kinds of music. In too many cities, that isn't the case today. Most communities count themselves lucky if they have one public station that airs classical music or jazz for even part of the day, much less 24 hours a day. Many markets, including some major ones, do without any kind of music on public radio.

Most of us recognize that things began to change in public radio with the rumblings from Washington that federal funding for public broadcasting might be eliminated. While federal assistance has survived, worried station leaders scrambled to identify alternative revenue sources in case CPB would be "zeroed out." The anxiety gave them reason to watch ratings with new urgency.

Public radio's long-term affair with audience research has had some notably positive effects on our on-air quality. While public radio was known as the source for classical music in particular, its on-air presentation was also known for sounding pretty amateurish. Classical announcers spoke with godlike pretension. Much of the other programming was volunteer-driven—and sounded like it.

Public radio was forced into a period of self-examination. As we came to depend

on the public for a significant portion of our funding, and became more accountable to our listeners, we began to pay a bit more attention to professionalism on the air. Unfortunately, that seems to be where the positive results end.

The extensive research that began in that period could have been directed to better advantage—looking at ways to improve the performance of air talent, for example. Instead, David Giovannoni and other ratings specialists have established a system of programming analysis that parallels exactly the influence of Arbitrons on commercial radio. If a show doesn't "perform," as measured in ratings, it's removed and replaced with one that will.

During this same period of transition, the love of music has waxed cold for many in public radio. The allure of younger audiences and greater revenue has seduced many of us to reduce or eliminate music offerings in favor of news and talk programming. Broadcasts of music, a public good of matchless nonfinancial value for human life, becomes a frill that can be traded away for news and information—another service that is also valuable but not interchangeable and that meets entirely different human needs. The really important thing, apparently, is that we give our audiences lots of information. If we have time to spare for music, we'll throw a little on the air.

Given the current mindset among many in public radio, the question once again turns to how we make the case for music programming.

I can argue that music is an extremely powerful, pervasive force. Every culture known to history has developed some

form of vocal music, some sorts of musical instruments. No one knows exactly where and how music began, but the sheer amount of music present in the world is indicative of the value that humans assign to it. Tribal societies rely on music as a fundamental of daily life. People in modern societies have music all around them—in worship, in entertainment, in the supermarket and the elevator. Music in some form appeals to almost every individual and is fundamental to our quality of life.

I can argue that music is a language both universal and unique. Music extends across the entire spectrum of humanity, serving as a means of expression. Yet different segments of humanity have different kinds of music. Music can help us to understand other cultures and subcultures and develop an appreciation for them and their forms of expression. Music can indeed break down barriers between individuals and cultures, reducing isolation and serving as a powerful humanizing influence.

I can argue that, despite the belief to the contrary, music is not separate from and less valuable than the intellect. Music encompasses mind, body and feeling. There are occasions when we seek to express emotions that are too profound or too private to be expressed verbally. At times, music supersedes language, combining intellect and emotion to express our innermost selves.

This phenomenon is so universal and so powerful that I can argue for its special place among the things that make life worth living. Recent research demonstrates that music exercises brain cells and circuits that aren't exercised in other ways. Neurologist Oliver Sacks says that our brains are wired more extensively for music than for language. And despite the faulty conclusions reached by the parents who seized on hopes that they could supercharge their babies' brains before birth by playing Mozart, there does seem to be a connection between music study and cognitive development.

I can make those arguments and more, but for many public radio managers there's still a disconnect between these values and their decisions about putting music on the air.

Let me suggest a few things that might help music regain a valued place on the

public radio spectrum:

**CPB should change its funding formula.**

The corporation's formula for apportioning federal aid puts music stations at a disadvantage. Stations' eligibility for Community Service Grants is based in part on gross revenue, not net revenue. Network news programming—theoretically, at least—will attract higher contributions, increasing gross revenue and thereby putting stations that don't air the network news shows at a disadvantage. But such programming is far more expensive to stations than locally programmed music.

That may be appropriate, because of the high cost of top-flight news coverage, though it makes no sense for all of public radio to rush to the high-revenue, high-cost option, or for CPB to maintain incentives to do so. If the CSG formula were based on net revenue (contributions minus programming costs), music stations would be better served. As it is, music stations may struggle to be eligible for CSGs.

Interestingly, the CPB-commissioned Brody Weiser Burns report *Having It All: How Public Radio Stations Can Provide Great Service and Live Within Their Means* ([www.cpb.org/stations](http://www.cpb.org/stations)) also recommends that CPB operating grants be tied to net revenue instead of being heavily influenced by gross revenue.

**Make a significant investment in professional development.** I'm often struck by p.d.'s and managers who say "I've tried everything to make music work" when I can almost always guarantee that they haven't. Stations are willing to spend tens of thousands of dollars on network news shows but are loath to spend a fraction of the same amount on better local air talent or on developing the talent they have. Sending a p.d., music director or announcer to the Music Personnel Conference or bringing in a talent trainer can make a big difference in the way they perform. And a one-time effort at professional develop-

ment isn't enough. To effect consistent improvement in quality, one must exert a consistent effort in developing one's staff.

**Remember why we're here.** I wonder how many people can even name the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 that established public radio, much less actually relate what's in it.

It takes a very loose reading of the act to find any case for a broadcast day filled with canned network programs. Public radio exists for instructional, educational and cultural purposes and to address the needs of unserved and underserved audiences.

With all that public radio and other media are doing for news and public affairs, those interests are no longer underserved in today's media environment. But the audience for the greatest achievements in music—classical and jazz in particular—is served by declining numbers of public radio stations.

It was a true news junkie, CNN founder Ted Turner, who observed, "Music has a great power for bringing people together. With so many forces in this world acting to drive wedges between people, it's important to preserve those things that help us experience our common humanity."

Will we abdicate our responsibility to the public to bring them mankind's greatest musical creations? Some public broadcasters today think it risky to choose music programming over news and talk.

In light of music's importance to humanity, and in light of our mission, I think the greater risk is to let music disappear from the public airwaves. ■

*David Duff, music director of Alabama Public Radio in Tuscaloosa, is president of the Association of Music Personnel in Public Radio. AMPPR will hold its 46th annual Music Personnel Conference Feb. 17-20 in Mobile, Ala. For more information, see the association's website, [amppr.org](http://amppr.org).*

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