

Growing Audiences through Programming

Everyone wants to build larger and more diverse audiences. Here's how David Finckel and Wu Han have used repertoire to keep their projects thriving.

Respecting the Core Repertoire

Every time you hear someone declare that the core repertoire is “overplayed” or “irrelevant” or “worn out”, or that it won't attract younger listeners, you are hearing not only a blatant falsehood but evidence of a poisonous and destructive attitude that deserves the most aggressive eradication. On the contrary, the reason that some music has earned the honor of the “core” identity is exactly because of its timelessness, which is a direct result of the stunning qualities of genius that it possesses. A symphony of Beethoven is no less meaningful or relevant than a play by Shakespeare; a quartet by Mozart no less amazing than a Faberge egg; a cantata of Bach no less awe-inspiring than Michelangelo's *Pieta*. Great music has passed a threshold beyond which criticism during any age, from any so-called “expert”, is simply rendered irrelevant based on the music's lasting, universal appeal and its easily quantifiable intrinsic values.

Having spent the greater part of our lives practicing, rehearsing and performing much if not most of the core chamber music literature, we can easily attest to that music's miraculous powers. Any professional musician will tell you that the great music has not only become a part of them but in many cases is the reason itself why they became musicians in the first place. And that magical power possessed by the core repertoire travels from the stage and from recordings deep inside those listeners who will allow it to, who are willing to give it the time of day. Great music can become a part of anybody. It can grow inside one to become not only a human asset but a basic need, something that evokes ever-greater pleasure and discovery on repeated hearings. That's because the music itself is crafted with a combination of genius, inspiration and skill that renders it *art*, not just sound.

Rolling Out the Masterpieces

Fortunately, there is plenty of core repertoire to supply season after season with programs without repeating any work for a long time. In fact, there is so much of it that it can be confusing if not dealt with intelligently. This is where Being a Chef comes in: how many opportunities you have to connect with your audience, and what performers you have access to, will in many respects determine what repertoire you are able to offer and when.

Another advantageous feature of the chamber repertoire is that there are core works to be programmed from all the great ages of chamber music: Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Modern and Contemporary. While there's nothing wrong with an all-Mozart concert, it's not necessary to stack masterpieces on top of one another in order to create a good program. This is area where performers, who have made their careers balancing programs, are likely to be the best consultants.

In any case, it's good for your audience to know that you will program core repertoire without shame, and that they can count on hearing the literature's greatest music regularly – with few exceptions, somewhere on every program.

Introducing Unknown Works

As soon as an audience member sees a work on a brochure that he or she is unfamiliar with, at this point the level of trust between presenter and listener becomes crucial. Even if it is a work by a composer such as Beethoven, if the audience member does not know it, they need to be convinced it is on the program for a good reason. The composer Aaron Copland once lamented that even the experienced listener usually knows only about ten works of any given composer, among hundreds or even thousands they may have composed. Not all works by any composer are of the exact same level, yet, for example, there are plenty of pieces by Dvorak or Haydn or Shostakovich which, although they might not have accrued masterwork status, are nonetheless worthy of performing and can function as delightful and meaningful discoveries. In these cases, the presenter may take the best advantage by articulating, with excitement and anticipation, the work's particular assets and how they may be best enjoyed.

Building New Music Acceptance

As with unfamiliar works by familiar composers described above, the role of presenter-listener trust comes to play an even more important role here. The first thing an audience member should feel is that a presenter is neither trying to provoke or humiliate them. Certain pieces, and indeed certain genres of new music, tend to put people off more than others. When that music is indeed very good music, it should be done justice by being presented in a context which does not set it up for failure, which means, the audience should be fully aware ahead of time of what the music is like ("Tell the Truth").

One must keep in mind that different musics undoubtedly excite varying neural activities in the listener's brain, as they do in the performers. So preparing the listener's ear for a less familiar work in a newer language is important. And it's surprising how many ways there are to do that. There are certain works by Bach, Haydn, Mozart and especially Beethoven, that foreshadow the contemporary idiom, and while they may not relate tonally to the new music, their other qualities – rhythmic energy, texture, structure, dynamic range – may be cut of the same cloth. Remember: composers are people and always have been, in possession of identical human instincts over the centuries. All one needs a little good advice from performers, and some knowledge of the composers' basic personalities and artistic methods. Beethoven and Shostakovich, for example, share a lot in terms of their motivic writing, the gripping drama of their music, their unerring sense of timing, and the intensity which reflects their own personal struggles.

One of the simplest ways to build the bridges of trust of which we have spoken is to surprise listeners with works that they anticipate not liking but cannot resist being swept up into. One of the most storied examples of a work such as this is Schoenberg's *Transfigured Night* for string sextet. Composed by one whose name traditionally strikes fear in the heart of audiences, this work, composed in 1900 on the eve of Schoenberg's journey into the 12-tone idiom, is a hyper-romantic, expressionist work that is inspired by and functions as the narrative of a dramatic and touching poem by Schoenberg's contemporary Richard Dehmel. *Transfigured Night*, or *Verklaerte Nacht* in German, is haunting, exciting and moving, a single-movement work that, even though it ends quietly, can easily end a program. Audiences are indeed transfigured after hearing this work, and it always opens doors in listeners' minds. Program this work, and we promise that the next time you present something unfamiliar, those who liked the Schoenberg will, for the most part, return because they were pleasantly surprised.

Give Them What They Want

And a final fact to remember is that even in smaller cities, different audiences or at least the potential for different audience exist. In any given place, there may be people who don't care to hear Mozart but want to hear Carter. So, give them Carter sometimes and don't make them listen to Mozart. In New York, we drew a large crowd to hear the Pacifica Quartet play all five Elliott Carter quartets in a single concert. A similar concert of the four quartets of Leon Kirchner – a pupil of Schoenberg – drew a similar crowd. We did not make them sit through Haydn to get their Schoenberg, much in the same way we don't make a habit of forcing our Schubert fans to listen to Bartok – UNLESS we find a compelling connection between the works that we are sure will intrigue and delight our listeners.

Building a Program

Musicians, when they make their own programs, are keenly conscious of how audiences will react throughout the evening. They plan the program for maximum effect, meaning that by its end, the audience will have the greatest chance of feeling totally satisfied, just like they've finished eating a great meal.

A concert program, from the point of view of the audience, is a kind of life cycle. There's definitely a morning-noon-night aspect to a program, in much the same way that a single piece of music is often built the same way. Like a great meal, a concert program should have balance, variety and structure. It should respect the state of the audience when it arrives, and the wishes of the audience at its conclusion. It should generate a memorable and lasting effect on the listener.

In thematic programming mode, a central work can serve as the program's anchor piece, around which, or leading up to it, other works are played which support and enhance the main work. But on any given night or afternoon, the same listener mindsets apply at various stages of the concert:

A program's opening work, like it or not, often functions as a transition for the listener between having run through traffic and crowds to make it there on time and what is hopefully a sublime musical experience. Listeners of today are more often than not catapulted straight back into the 18th century with an opening work by Haydn or Mozart, which can serve like a cultural cold plunge that certainly puts the mind's ear in a different zone. How quickly listeners can make that transition varies according to listening experience, to arrival experience, and also to how much forethought has been put in by the listener. Did they have a chance to read the program notes? Maybe, maybe not. In any case, the first work on a program is the musicians' way of welcoming the audience. And they can be welcomed in different ways: there's the invitation to 18th century civility, for sure, but a work of any period that's immediately mesmerizing in some way will also serve to draw the listener in.

That said, we would venture that as a first work, mesmerizing or inviting is preferable to dense and complex. If the ears are not warmed up yet, perhaps better to wait until they are before offering something that demands full concentration, a more open mind, and a higher rate of comprehension. It's a reasonable guess that audiences are at their height of concentrating ability leading up to intermission.

After intermission, when the audience has had more of an opportunity to socialize than before the concert, is the time for audience reward. That doesn't mean easy listening but that they expect that by the end of the concert they will be completely satisfied. The final works on a program function best if they logically follow the music of the first half. It is of course nice if the concluding work on a program

has a loud and exciting finish, as most often happens. Audiences and musicians love it equally. But it doesn't have to be that way. Some of the most stunning program-closers we've heard have soft, otherworldly endings: Schoenberg's Transfigured Night, Copland's Appalachian Spring, Beethoven's Piano Trio Op. 1 No. 3, Shostakovich's 15th Quartet, and Dohnanyi's 2nd Piano Quintet – all can leave an audience spellbound in a very good way. Once again, consult the musicians: if they say it works, believe them. They want just as successful a concert as the presenter.

Summary

At the end of the day, it's the music itself which builds audiences. It's the music that you want to build your audiences, because it is a sustainable resource. Big name performers with big fees and beautiful photos and 10-page contract riders are not sustainable either financially or in terms of predictability. Program a great work by Beethoven and you know it's going to be great: that never changes and that assurance doesn't cost a dime or even a drop of sweat. If you become obsessed with great music, and give your audience plenty of it, they will follow you.

The other facet of audience building is performance and presentation quality, described in a separate page titled Building Audiences through Presentation.

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