Challenges of Programming New Music in Modern Day Orchestras

By Justin Laukat

Introduction:

In modern-day orchestras, a fundamental disconnect often exists between what composers offer and what audiences want to hear, shaping how music is programmed, performed, and received. While composers seek to express personal innovation and push aesthetic boundaries, audiences often gravitate toward familiar, historically established repertoire. This tension is further complicated by institutional pressures such as funding, programming demands, and the need to maintain attendance that influence both creative decisions and audience engagement. With the rise of varying popular styles of music, this becomes a challenge as classical music concerts are not as well attended as they used to be in the olden days. The following is cited in “Music and the Audience” by Vera Iconomova: “Data supplied by the Belgrade Public Opinion Service run by the Institute of Social Sciences in that city show that 23 percent of the citizens never go to concerts; folk music concerts are most popular - they attract 33 percent of the citizens; popular music concerts attract 29 percent, while serious music concerts are least popular and attract only 15 percent of the citizens. (Javno mnenje Beograda, 1971). Some conductors reenforce the view that audiences just want to hear the same music over and over again but overlook the evidence that shows that the issue isn’t actually about whether the music is new or not, but whether or not the audience is able to absorb and engage in the new music. How the music is being presented will also affect their ability to engage as well. This study explores how composers and orchestras today can navigate changing music trends and work

together in bringing new music to audiences in ways that will help them to be fully engaged in the music.

Abstract:

In the context of modern orchestras, composers are often overlooked when it comes to programming because many conductors cater to audiences that want to hear the same music, limiting opportunities for composers to create new music. Of course there are always gonna be situations that are exceptions to this and opinions vary widely about the role of composers and audiences. In a study like this, some may argue that there is no issue here, that composers need to just fit in with the times and stop shooting for the stars. Not every composition student is fortunate enough to attend a school that supports composers and not every conductor thinks the same when programming repertoire. This study is not meant to introduce a new revolutionary idea, but to help everyone involved in the creation, programming and execution of the music to work together and put aside differences to really understand where the other is coming from. As we come to realize everyones potential (not just the high performing musicians), we can offering alternative ways of thinking that will enhance the overall music experience for everyone involved.

It can certainly be argued that “audiences wanting to hear the same thing over and over again” is a stereotype, but there are countless examples that show that many audience members gravitate towards this. What audiences forget, though, is that all music was once new. “All music was new once, and good music has never been appreciated immediately by the public. The public was always in lag. This is simply one of the

musical facts of life that is undebatable. The public has always caught up, and it will do so again. Present-day conductors and public are not adventurous enough. If such lethargy had prevailed in the past, we would not be listening today to Beethoven's Third or to Berlioz's Fantastic Symphony." (Mueller, 1957). Critics have also been in “lag” as well. “Then as now, critics wrote their reviews in terms of first impressions within a short lapse of time after a performance. Then, as now, critics also were human and employed their own tastes and professional prejudices in formulating their opinions, which were subject to reversals and modifications with the passage of time.” (Mueller, 1957). One example that illustrates this point is found the following list that shows the Repertory of Beethoven’s music by the Gewandhaus Orchestra. Although Beethoven wasn’t directly involved with the orchestra, it was one of the first ensembles to premier and celebrate much of his works. It shows the programming of his works for 30 consecutive years. To give more context, an annual concert season for the orchestra averaged around 20-24 performances given. The X’s indicate his early symphonies, specifically 1,2, and 3. In the first 2 years, Beethoven’s music only received 2 performances, but by 1830, many of the same pieces were being performed over and over again, showing how his music gained more exposure over time.

BEETHOVEN ITEMS IN THE REPERTORY OF THE GEWANDHAUS ORCHESTRA
LEIPZIG, 1799-1830

Year	*Symphonies*	*Overtures*	*Concertos*	*Miscellaneous*
1799				x
1800				x
1801	*XX			
1802	XX		XX	xx
1803	XX		X	x
1804	XXX2	X	X	
1805	XXX	XXXX	X	
1806	XXX		X	
1807	X2333	XX		
1808	XX	XXX		xxx
1809	XXXXX3566	X	X	
1810	X4	X3	XX	x
1811	XXX13	X5	XXX	
1812	XXXX		X3	
1813	X3	X3		xx
1814	X4	X		xxx
1815	XXX234	X00	3	xx
1816	XX1467X	50	X5	
1817	X3477	X3		xx
1818	257788	459	X4	
1819	34668	3	3	
1820	223357X	330	4	x
1821	12578	50 Ø	5	xxx
1822	X2334457	XX33 Ø Z		xxxx
1823	1124578	355Ø	5	xxxx
1824	34467778	359 Ø Z		xx
1825	112233558 Y	/ 335 Ø		xxxxx
1826	45677889999	45689	35	xxx
1827	123445556	3368 Ø		xxxxxxxxx
1828	1223356789	35578 Ø		xxxxxxx
1829	234567889 Y	335	5	xxxxxx
1830	1445567789	458 Ø		xxxxxxx

* *Key:* Unidentified symphonies are indicated by the symbol "X" and are usually the very early ones: that is, the first, second, or third. The symbol "Y" indicated *Wellington's Victory*, and all other symphonies are numbered. Concertos, all for piano, are also numbered. Overtures are numbered for convenience as follows: 1, 2, 3—*Leonora;* 4—*Fidelio;* 5—*Coriolanus;* 6—Opus 115 in C; 7—*King Stephan;* 8—*Weihe des Hauses;* 9—*Prometheus;* 0 and Ø—*Egmont* complete and partial; Z—*Ruins of Athens*. Miscellaneous items, all indicated by "x" include chamber music, piano solos, and vocal numbers.

If Beethoven was experiencing "lag" in his day, imagine the "lag" we experience today. Studies have shown that "there was a time when newly written music was the default, if not the exclusive content of most concert programs. The miscellany style of programming common in the late-eighteenth century featured many genres and styles but consisted almost exclusively of new or recent music." (Weber, 2008). All of this was

to change in the early nineteenth century when a deeply historicist tendency took hold as the merits of older music came to be more widely propagated and recognized. The balance of old to new music in the concert programs of major European musical centers changed drastically, from about 80% new to 80% old within the first half of the century alone. (Burkholder, 1983). The most logical explanation for this may be that with more music circulating around, the consumer has less need to rely solely on new music.

IS NEW MUSIC THE REAL ISSUE?

With such a vast array of music genres and recordings nowadays, audiences can experience listening to more new music and learn to appreciate it in a variety of forms. “The question is not whether the potential masterpieces were new, but rather whether the increments of novelty which they represented was within the power of the general audience to absorb them. That there should be different reactions among the members of the public, as well as among the critics, would be a foregone conclusion.” (Die allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung, 1798-1848). “Bach’s music was considered learned and complex in a time that increasingly favored the simpler, more immediately appealing galant style. His works, while admired by some, were often seen as overly intricate and out of step with contemporary tastes.” (Schulenberg, 2020). Audiences need to be exposed to more new pieces to help them in developing their own tastes in music. “Musical tastes are part of musical culture, and as such they are an acquired, learned property. Musical tastes are not an instinctive or biological force transmitted in a hereditary way - in the same way in which, for instance, natural musicality is transmitted. Musical taste designates an acquired tendency to respond to certain stimuli

in certain situations; this is the tendency that every individual must acquire through his own experience. It is the result - as noted by Alphons Silbermann (Sociology of Music, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1963). It's like Children who want to watch their favorite shows over and over again. It is their comfortable feel good spot. When faced with the choice to watch something new or go to their favorite show, there is the uncertainty of whether they will like the new so it is easier to cling to what they know they like already.

To better understand the potential disconnect between composers and audiences, it's essential to explore trends and how both creators and listeners responded to them. By exploring the challenges found in absorbing new music, we can help composers, performers, and audiences engage more deeply and meaningfully with music in a concert setting.

Addressing Audiences and Critics:

Theres nothing quite like a catchy melody that gets stuck in your head after a single listen. As Haydn famously claimed, "melody is the main thing" (Landowska, 1964, p. 336). Elegance, wit, and refinement—qualities well represented in the music of Haydn, whose popularity reflected his ability to meet his audiences expectations.

Dean Keith Simonton who was a distinguished professor of Psychology at the University of California conducted a modern computer-based analysis of 15,618 classical themes, which measured melodic originality as "the inverse of the mean probability for all five transitions for each theme," found that the second movement of Haydn's Symphony No. 94 ranked highest in predictability. The theme, which resembles Twinkle, Twinkle, Little

Star, features transitions that occur about 4% of the time in repertoire” (Simonton, 1994). This predictability set up the movement’s famous “surprise,” demonstrating how Haydn skillfully played with audience expectations for dramatic effect.

When we shop online or go to the movie theater, we often read through reviews that inform us of what we need to know about the product or experience. We have to filter what is important to us with things that are less important and weigh all of our options. After we receive the product or have gone through the experience, we realize what actually is important and all the things that we overlooked because we didn’t know what we were getting ourselves into. If the experience is bad, we may be inclined to never give it another chance.

When needed, audiences will turn to critics to tell them whats good and what’s not. Edward T. Cone who is a renowned conductor, composer, and critic wrote “The Authority of Music Criticism” in the Journal of the American Musicological Society in 1981. In here he discusses how critics evaluate music. This system of evaluating will help give the audience member context behind the music and understand the musical elements involved. Program notes can be used to convey this information as well as talking to the audience. “In the case of the music critic there are at least three such "modes of understanding." First the "musicological": a recognition of the facts-ethnic, social, political, historical, biographical--that form the background of the work under discussion, and above all a capacity to discriminate between those that are relevant and those that are not”. Then the technical: a comprehension of the syntax of the musical language employed, and an ability to explain, through analysis, the workings of that syntax. Finally, the experiential: the insight that can come only from personal contact

with a wide range of music, familiarity with the style embodied by the work at hand, and close study of the work itself.

What does the music-lover expect of such a critic? The consumer wants to know how to buy; the musician wants to know how to play or to compose; what does the music-lover want to know? In the broadest sense, he wants to know how to listen. The critic, as I have suggested, is a teacher of appreciation at the highest level. A reader values a critic's knowledge for its usefulness as a guide toward a convincing interpretation and evaluation of a work. Interpretation: how the work can be heard in its own terms, both formal and expressive. Evaluation: how the work can be heard in relation to others, and what its ultimate significance may be. It is the critic's job to articulate these insights in such a way as to make them available to his readers: that is the purpose of his formal discourse." (Cone,1981)

Composer Realities:

Composers have been innovating and challenging norms. Styles have ranged from atonality (Schoenberg) to minimalism (Glass) to electronic music. With almost total freedom, composers can write for orchestras, film, video games, digital platforms, commissions, and teaching. With oversaturation of the market (more composers than ever) and decline of classical music’s mainstream audience, there have been fewer stable commissions, making it necessary for composers to rely on multiple jobs to sustain a career. AI-generated compositions have made music creation easier than ever, sometimes taking the place of roles that would normally be performed by humans. With instant access to technology, diversity, self-publishing and global distribution of music, composers must learn to cater to diverse audiences and adapt to changing

needs. “The essential questions that are lacking in most US conservatory curricula are: Who is it we are performing for? What is it that audiences want and value in live performances? How can I help build audiences for my art form and for my next performance? Although these types of questions are often addressed in music management and arts administration courses and programs, most students focusing on performance are not asked to consider for whom they are performing or why, or what is the optimal context for the audience to experience the performance. Or what is music’s function or its value in community settings.” (Beeching, 2016) “Some faculty members are understandably reluctant to bring too much reality into discussions of the profession for fear it will discourage students. Others assume these topics are covered more appropriately and skillfully in other classes, resulting in a kind of segregated or “siloed” learning.” (Beeching, 2016)

Being able to determine whether implicit knowledge can be absorbed from new music can help you know if your audience will stay engaged, even if they can’t express it in words. “It has been suggested that untrained musicians have implicit knowledge of that which musicians can talk about explicitly” (Sloboda, 1985, p. 5). A study was conducted showing how music majors vs non music majors responded to excerpts from Stravinsky's The Rite of Spring. The different responses between the groups in this study suggest that the “selected excerpts by Stravinsky may represent a level of music and, more specifically, a level of compositional complexity that might not be implicit and thus might be a challenge for the less experienced listener. This complexity is evidenced by powerful changes in texture, characterized by distinct contrasts in consonance and dissonance, and intense rhythmic influences (Sloboda, 1985, p. 5)

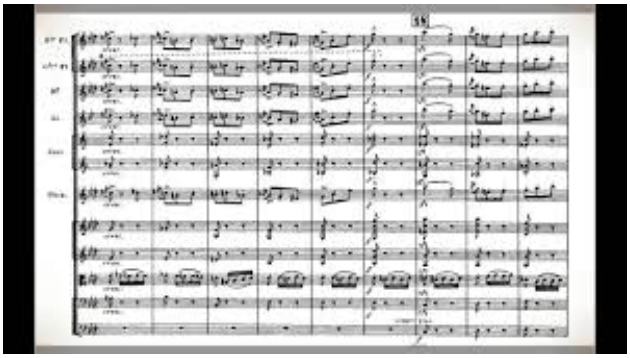
“To understand one’s customers (non-musician audiences), musicians need a key life skill—that of empathy. Musicians need to understand how their performance is perceived and what the audience responds to and why. A lack of connection to real world application stands in the way of many students’ abilities to imagine and create professional niches for themselves. And with a rapidly changing music profession, it has become increasingly important for musicians to develop multiple income streams and their own niches, in order to build sustainable careers." (Beeching, 2016)

Arthur Berger shares his firsthand account of working with various composers from the “Boston School of Composers’, including Irving Fine and Harold Shapero as well as his insights into the 20th Century classical scene. “Berger’s litany of complaints about the state of serious music and its audience will be familiar to all: American composers are overshadowed by their European counterparts (dead and alive); they are also directly opposed by too many conductors, critics, and elitist audience members who prefer to hear the same fifty works again and again. Many Beleaguered composers retreat to universities, where instead of making common cause, too often they battle over ideological, aesthetic, and technical issues, sometimes challenging each other's seriousness and legitimacy. Berger stood in the midst of such controversies-in the company of the foremost composers, conductors, critics, and theorists-for a very long time, and he is thus in a good position to have a story to tell", (Berger, 2002).

Research Objectives:

The object in my research is to analyze how people listen to a piece of music in 3 different contexts and determine what methods are effective for audience engagement. To accomplish this, I sent 3 different YouTube videos featuring Paul Dukas' Sorcerer's Apprentice to a sample of 18 people of various levels of music education ranging from ages 6-80. 2 thirds of participants ranged from amateur musicians to professionals. The other 1/3 had no music training. In the 1st video, it shows a scrolling score from the performance of the Berlin Philharmonic. In the 2nd video, it shows the scene from Disney's Fantasia with the music playing in the background. In the 3rd video, it shows the Frankfort Radio Symphony performance of the piece.

1. Scrolling Score



2. Fantasia Movie

3. Orchestra View

After each listen I conducted a survey asking participants to answer 3 questions. The questions are as follows:

1. What are your general feelings? (Their emotional response)
2. What things did you notice? (How much they hear vs see)
3. What engagement rating would you give this?

I stressed the fact that recording non engagement or disinterest was just as important as reporting what stood out to them and they shouldn't try too hard to search for something to write. My aim was to depict a more realistic response to how they would respond in an actual concert setting.

Here is a summary of the responses:

1. Scrolling Score

Positive engagement tended to come from those with some music reading ability or curiosity about structure (watching for instruments, anticipating changes). Negative engagement often mentioned confusion, disconnection, or being overwhelmed by the visual complexity. Some respondents found it hard to engage due to lack of visual connection to musicians or limited music literacy, however, many were able to see transitions from tutti sections to smaller scored sections based on the amount of “black ink on the page”. Several mentioned that seeing the score added a level of intrigue but distracted from emotional/musical impact. Many couldn’t follow the score but were still curious and excited when they realized some of the instruments playing on the score (especially the parts with fewer instruments playing that made it easier to spot certain sounds). For a couple who had extensive music training, being able to see what music each instrument was playing added the highest level of intrigue, but this was the exception. One of the non music participants reported that they only listened to the music and didn’t watch the score.

2. Fantasia Movie

Visual storytelling strongly influenced engagement; viewers often became more focused on the animation narrative than the music itself. Some were nostalgic or entertained but felt the music became secondary to the animation. Others were emotionally driven by the pairing and found it highly engaging. Strong narrative familiarity enhanced enjoyment for some but distracted others from the music. Those familiar with the video had mixed reactions: either enhanced immersion or distraction. In terms of age, the younger children by far experienced the most engagement with the movie than with the other 2 videos. Interestingly, one participant correctly identified the main argument through this exercise as they were contemplating what the purpose was in these listening experiments saying “Justin may have a theory of interest being greater when there is familiarity or maybe when there is also visual stimulation included. That was definitely the case with me.”

Many had imagined the music differently listening to the scrolling clip than when they watched the movie. One participant said they thought the music alone sounded ominous and never would have guessed a magician brewing up potion. Another participant said they felt excited listening to the music but felt scared watching the movie and seeing Mickey sneakily command the brooms and wondering if the sorcerer would catch Mickey using his hat. A few others also felt nervous or worried but also entertained at the same time. For several the movie obviously fit well to the music and didn’t seem surprised or shocked (even if they weren’t already familiar with it). One participant felt the music didn’t fit well to the movie.

Surprisingly, only a couple people mentioned anything about sound quality. One non music person thought the music was too loud and distracting and the other person didn't like the overdubbing of sounds and low sound quality given that it is 1940's technology. A study that supports this type of listening context of an adult audiences behavior during a child performance concert was conducted during the 2002-2003 school year by Wendy Borst, choral music teacher in an Eastern Pennsylvania suburban elementary school. She found that "audiences seemed to be best focused when dramatic/visual components accompanied the music." (Nicolucci, 2010)

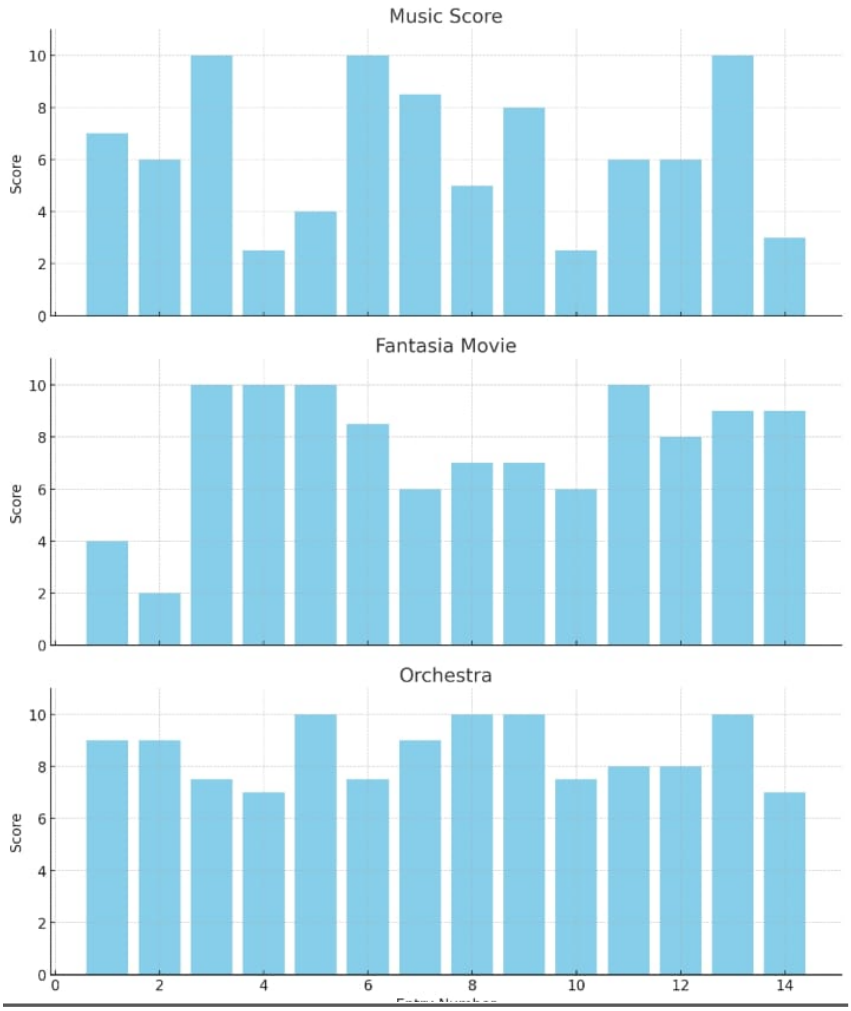
3. Orchestra (Frankfurt Radio Symphony)

Many respondents emphasized being drawn to the musicians' expressions, body language, and visual cues, which heightened emotional and musical engagement. Several mentioned being able to match sounds to instruments, increasing appreciation. The human element was a key factor in maintaining attention and enjoyment. Even viewers with little musical background appreciated the energy and emotion conveyed by the performers. A couple found it "unpleasant" or got bored eventually, but these were exceptions. Interestingly, some of the highly trained musicians felt intimidated or incompetent, contemplating what the audition process must be like to get into one of those orchestras. Seeing musicians also helped participants to notice the way instruments were played (bowing, plucking, strumming, blowing etc.) as well as musical effects such as staccatos, slurs, spiccato (bouncing), accents and glissandos/slides. For the musical participants, the movements in the orchestra were reenforced by what they saw in the score. One of the non musicians noticed that the conductor was constantly

turning pages which made sense to them after seeing the score. Had they not seen the score first, they may have not noticed the page turning. Overall, there was a good balance between auditory and visual engagement.

“Studies have shown that ‘‘Other investigations have isolated aspects of live music performance for consideration, showing that being able to see as well as hear the players can generate stronger emotional responses” (Krahé, Hahn, & Whitney, 2015).

Engagement Rating Results:



Music Score

Average: 6.32, Median: 6.0

Fantasia Movie

Average: 7.61, Median: 8.25

Orchestra

Average: 8.54, Median: 8.5

Although the combination of seeing humans playing while hearing the music was the biggest factor in determining overall engagement in the experiment, the other methods certainly helped to enhance curiosity and excitement in discovering various aspects of what was going on with the music and visuals. Since each person has their unique ways of learning and absorbing music (visual, aural, kinesthetic, etc)
finding multiple ways to engage audiences can help everyone to learn through their preferred methods and therefore, enhance their engagement to the fullest.
Music in movies and other forms such as dance and theatre can have a powerful effect in engaging audiences. Recent studies in separate art forms have identified distinctive features of dance (Reason & Reynolds, 2010), theatre (Sauter, 2002) and opera audiences (Jobst & Boerner, 2011), and yet have generated overarching themes: quality of art and connection with performers emerge as the strongest factors in audience satisfaction (Sauter, 2002), with the peripheral aspects of venue comfort and friendliness having least overall effect (Jobst & Boerner, 2011).

Conclusion: How can we best introduce new music to audiences?

Introducing new music to audiences requires a thoughtful and flexible approach. Given the diversity of listeners, it's impossible to please everyone at once, so variety in both repertoire and presentation is essential to keep audiences engaged. While familiarity can be comforting, it isn’t always more effective—many listeners enjoy the freshness and surprise of the unfamiliar. The human element, especially the ability to see and connect with performers, significantly enhances the experience. Listeners don’t necessarily struggle with new music because it's new, but rather because it may not hold their interest or may be too complex to process easily. Sometimes, it simply takes time for audiences to warm up to unfamiliar works. Some rely on critics to help them understand what to listen for, which can shape their choices and expectations. Above all, the quality of music must be high; knowing the strengths and capabilities of the musicians ensures a successful and compelling introduction of new works.

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