

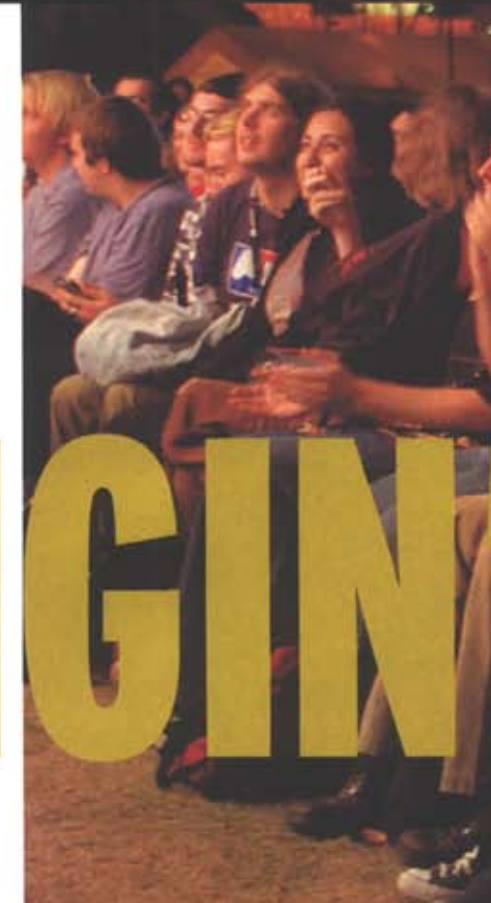


by Rebecca Winzenried



THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHAN GIN

Shifts in audience tastes and lifestyles are affecting pops programs. Are orchestras keeping up?



David Healy
An orchestra's dream audience? Young fans have flocked to the *Final Fantasy* concerts, often towing their parents along for the experience.

Pops season brochures have been piling up on my desk for some time now. They're a colorful lot, full of razzle-dazzle and legendary names—Tony Bennett, Debbie Reynolds, the Duke Ellington Orchestra. But wait. What's this? Elvis Costello appearing with the Baltimore Symphony? Seal with the Minnesota Orchestra? Members of Styx with the Jacksonville Symphony? When did Rock and Roll Hall of Famers and power ballad singers of the 1970s become symphony material?

Something is happening in the land of orchestral pops and, like so many things in

American culture, we can start by blaming it on the baby boomers. The first wave of boomers has turned 60 this year, putting them smack in the middle of what has long been considered prime pops-audience territory. (Orchestras tend to peg the average pops patron at 55-62 years of age, the average classical patron at 57.)

And pops concerts are starting to reflect the changing demographic. Like the Greatest Generation before them, the boomers are clinging steadfastly to the music of their youth. Where acts devoted to the music of Frank Sinatra and Glenn Miller have long ruled the pops calendar, it's time to bring

on the Beatles tributes and symphonic Led Zeppelin.

There's where the old generation gap rears its head again. No matter how exciting the prospect of an orchestral "Stairway to Heaven" may be for Zeppelin fans, it probably doesn't have much appeal to those who have been attending pops concerts for 20 years or more. Neither is it of great interest to anyone whose formative musical experiences happened in the past decade or so; those younger bodies that orchestras hope to see in the seats have little more than a detached, ironic attraction to music of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s.

David Heffig



It seems that pops programming isn't a one-size-fits-all proposition anymore.

For decades, orchestras have relied upon performers of a certain genre to fill the house for pops concerts. As one executive director noted, programming pops concerts was a little like leafing through the big Christmas catalogue as a kid. "I'll take one of those and two of those." Big names could be counted on for an extra boost with galas or "super pops." Post a few ads noting that Tony Bennett was going to be in town, and the tickets would practically sell themselves. If you couldn't afford the real Tony Bennett, shows could be equally fabulous with a lesser-known performer working off the Broadway, jazz, and standards play lists. After all, who can argue with a Gershwin tune? Or a melody by Strauss?

Of course, there was an assumption that Americans could be counted on to appreciate a Strauss waltz, while also recognizing that the Gershwins had penned a tune called "By Strauss" (used in the film *An American in Paris*). That world—a sort of 1950s dreamscape where everyone was tuned into the same variety television shows and Top 40 radio—doesn't exist anymore. Pop culture today is ruled by customization, specialization, and highly evolved niche programming that can deliver news, music, and movies to targeted consumer groups on demand. *Billboard* uses 20 different charts for single and digi-



"The Golden Age of Black and White" is rendered in bright color for the Symphonic Pops Consortium program saluting the 1950s. The show's visual aspects appeal to younger audiences as much as the music.



tal tracks in rock, pop, hip-hop, Latin, Christian music, and even cell-phone ringtones. The hottest news in radio is the explosive growth of the 100-plus channel satellite subscription services, allowing listeners to zero in on music of specific decades, genres, and subgenres.

Which leaves orchestra programmers in a quandary: Classical subscription series are driven by the artistic mission, but pops programs are driven by audience tastes. How does an orchestra go about scheduling pops programs—by their very definition concerts of popular music—when even music industry insiders can't get a handle on what pop culture means today? Is it even possible for pops programs to attract general audiences in a segmented entertainment world?

Copycat Concerts

The questions would be easy to dismiss if pops weren't of significance to an orchestra's bottom line. National numbers are hard to pin down, since there's so much variation among orchestras of different

How does an orchestra go about scheduling pops programs—when even music industry insiders can't get a handle on what pop culture means today?

sizes and the number and complexity of pops concerts they offer, from a single guest artist sitting down at the piano to song-and-dance revues. But anecdotal evidence suggests that orchestras count on consistent-selling pops concerts to contribute to the operating budget.

At the same time, few can afford to dedicate personnel to that aspect of operations. "Not many administrators have the knowledge, the passion, or the time to do the pops program," says Ty Johnson, executive producer of the Symphonic Pops Consortium, which is based at the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. "Some do, and if they can balance it and make things work, that's great. But it takes a great deal of time and energy to do it right."

His point is driven home by the fact that the Symphonic Pops Consortium—which started out in 1999 as a coalition of six orchestras working to share the extensive costs of producing programs that were eventually offered for general bookings—

tin,
ing-
the
mel
lis-
zific

s in
:are
pops
ites.
dul-
ini-
hen
et a
day?
s to
sted

ss if
hes-
are
uch
rent

go about
ven music

y of
ngle
s to
evi-
on
con-

led-
ons.
owl-
the
tive
ort-
olis
d if
ork,
ime

that
ich
six
sive
vere
—

005

has morphed into an ISO initiative. The orchestra has always served as the consortium's production headquarters. "They all say, 'We love the shows, we just don't have time to think about it. Just bring them to us,'" says Johnson.

Indeed, it seems that pops programmers are always casting about with colleagues for ideas about acts that sell well, have good charts, and are easy to work with. (Outrageous contract demands and diva-ish behavior toward musicians or staff are duly noted and passed along.) "I've noticed that there is a lot of copying out there," says Gideon Toepfritz. The former executive vice president and managing director of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra is now working with orchestras on pops issues as a vice president with Arts Consulting Group. "One orchestra will call up another and say, 'Who have you used and how did it sell?' And they'll repeat it. That doesn't necessarily work. You need to do market research to

find out what works for your part of the country. It doesn't have to be elaborate market research. You can do it by polling the audience. Find out what they want to hear and what they don't want to hear."

Orchestra marketers and managers



New names on the orchestra circuit: Seal appeared with the Minnesota Orchestra and LeAnn Rimes with the Boston Pops as part of the Argent Mortgage Orchestrated concerts.

aren't totally unaware of the fact that artists are received differently, depending upon the region of the country. Opinions differ, for example, on whether big-name acts are fading in popularity as the artists themselves age or whether thematic programs—the Broadway, Big Band, holiday, jazz/cabaret/ dance programs seen in endless variations—are a better bet.

The Symphonic Pops Consortium



scheduling pops programs—by their very definition concerts of industry insiders can't get a handle on what pop culture means today?



Rock and Roll Hall-of-Famer Elvis Costello will help the Baltimore Symphony inaugurate its Pops Rocks series this season. The program will include his first orchestral work, *Il Sogno*, which he premiered with the Brooklyn Philharmonic in 2004.

remains focused on the latter, putting together programs that aim for broad appeal, such as "The Beat Goes On," which mines hits of the 1960s and early '70s, and "The 1950s: The Golden Age of Black and White." Audience members don't have to be old enough to have experienced the music firsthand to appreciate staging and costumes that evoke, and poke gentle fun at, the styles and mores of the Eisenhower era. In one scene, an impeccably dressed housewife, in shirtwaist and heels, delivers cupcakes to the kids before grabbing her martini from the center of the tray and launching into a torch song.

"There are some 30-year-olds in the seats," says Johnson. "Younger people like it because they are so visual. At the same time, we have to balance that for regular patrons. I really don't want to anger the 60- or



Mark Curran

It's not unusual to find once flamboyantly over-the-top rock acts teaming up with orchestras. Elton John took the stage with Peter Nero and the Philly Pops for a Philadelphia Freedom concert last July.

70-year-old patron who's had a subscription for years, and who will not only *not* like the performance, but will *dislike* it greatly."

Subscription sales, of course, are key to the way orchestras budget for and program a pops season. But single-ticket sales are of increasing appeal to audiences seeking that big word: flexibility. American Symphony Orchestra League statistics show that single-ticket sales in pops have increased at orchestras of all group sizes over the past

LeAnn Rimes in performance with the Boston Pops, Seal with members of the Minnesota Orchestra, Jewel with the Cleveland Pops Orchestra, and Duran Duran with the Orlando Philharmonic were presented last summer under the Argent Mortgage Orchestrated banner. The series was developed by Elevation Entertainment, a Cleveland-based marketing company, as a sort of reverse *MTV Unplugged*. Instead of putting rock acts in a small, acoustic setting, the Argent Mort-

The "One Night Only" approach may be bringing a new crop of artists to sell out the pops venue. But what, really, does it offer orchestras in the long run?

three years, just as they have for classical-series concerts. The increases aren't dramatic, but the percentage of single-ticket sales has inched up a point or two each year, across the board.

Again, blame the baby boomers and their offspring, who have demonstrated a reluctance to commit time and money to subscription packages. As the League's Audience Motivation Report found in 2003, they prefer instead to pick and choose among entertainment options as their schedules permit.

They might, for instance, be tempted at the idea of a concert by a familiar name from their (fairly recent) past. Special-event, one-night-only concerts that paired

gage-sponsored series put performers before the full power of an orchestra.

Denny Young, president of Elevation Entertainment, has long been intrigued by the idea of hearing some of the artists with orchestra. "Seal was a no-brainer. I thought Seal's music would be beautiful with an orchestra," he says. It doesn't hurt that the performers selected are most appealing to the 30- to 40-year-old demographic. "That falls right into the market that orchestras are making an effort to attract, to expand their fan base," says Young.

While the concept of pairing pop artists with orchestra is not exactly novel, it's the first time that such an endeavor has been developed under the umbrella of a nation-



WORD PROS, INC.

PROGRAM NOTES

Informative and entertaining, with accessible discussion of the music itself, as well as lively historical and cultural background information.

- ♪ Program book editing and layout
- ♪ Special program book articles
- ♪ Understandable musical analysis
- ♪ Text translation
- ♪ 24-hour turnaround on rush jobs
- ♪ Notes for chamber ensembles
- ♪ Audio examples for web sites

See samples at:

www.wordprosmusic.com

Elizabeth A. Kahn, Ph.D.

Joseph S. Kahn, Ph.D.

phone: 919 851-2410

wordpros@mindspring.com

...four piano artistry
...with your orchestra
...from Bach to Broadway

piano4



For information & booking:

www.piano4.org • 1-888-844-4248

ally sponsored series. Artists were paired with orchestras in cities identified by Argent, and marketing was a cooperative effort between the orchestras and the promoter. "These orchestras live, breathe, and eat in their market, but we don't," says Young. "They know the radio stations that would be interested, the alternative press." The sponsor's support allowed a larger-than-normal marketing push, according to Reid McLean, director of presentations at the Minnesota Orchestra. The Seal concert in Minneapolis was a quick sellout, with the orchestra acting as presenter.

Charts were prepared by various arrangers with an eye toward giving musicians more than a backup-band status. "If the musicians are bored, that translates to the artists—and to the audience," says Gideon Toeplitz, who served as a consultant to orchestras for the series. He anticipates more dates, or multiple dates, being added to the series calendar, to take advantage of the fact that charts are available.

Eager Ears

The "One Night Only" approach of such special events may be bringing a new crop of artists to sell out the pops venue. But what, really, does it offer orchestras in the long run? Pops series, as programmed by an orchestra, have traditionally been viewed as a bridge to the regular classical series, a way to draw audiences with some lighter fare,

San Diego symphonies, Symphony Silicon Valley, and the Chicagoland Pops over the past year. Rabid young fans of the music by Japanese composer Nobuo Uematsu have made a run on the box office for every *Final Fantasy* date since the U.S. debut by the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2004. Tickets often sell out within a day with little promotion required, as advance word spreads through game fan web sites and Internet chat rooms.

Final Fantasy concert promoter Christopher Davis, who logged several years working in classical-music presentation, firmly believes that video-game music is the next logical step in the tradition of drawing audiences into classical concerts through pops. Orchestras have been playing incidental music for a hundred years, he says. And what is Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King"—a classical pops staple—if not a series of scenes much like the challenges found in fantasy role-playing games?

The advantage of video-game concerts is that audience members already have a deep emotional connection with the music and they want to hear it performed live, often traveling some distance to do so. "That eagerness to hear live orchestra music spells an opportunity," says Davis. Video screens mounted above the stage show some game clips, but for most of the concert, they are focused on musicians in the orchestra.

What is Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King"—a classical pops staple—if not a series of scenes much like the challenges found in a fantasy role-playing game?

and hopefully entice them to return for the heavier-lifting programs—which they would enjoy from their regular subscription seats.

That role may very well be taken by pops-oriented programs of a most unlikely type. The orchestra world has really not seen anything quite like the runaway success of the "Dear Friends: Music from Final Fantasy" series. Concerts featuring orchestral versions of music from the *Final Fantasy* video-game series have been performed by the Atlanta, Detroit, Fort Worth, and

"Essentially, it's just a classical concert with a little video thrown in."

From there, Davis believes, it isn't much of a leap to imagine pops concerts presented by the orchestras themselves, featuring works of Uematsu or other game-music composers coupled with some Tchaikovsky or Stravinsky. In fact, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* music critic Pierre Ruhe suggested just that in his review of the *Final Fantasy* concert performed by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra last June. Noting that the program was pre-packaged by Square Enix,

which owns the game, he wrote, "It's a pity the ASO couldn't insert viscerally charged, full-flavor music from its core repertoire, say part of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* or Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*."

Comment on the music itself has been mixed, but film and video-game scores certainly lend themselves more easily to orchestral interpretation than rock or hip-hop ever will. More melodic rock tunes of earlier decades are gradually making their way into pops programs—Beatles fare is perhaps the most successful, with acts such as Classical Mystery Tour gaining favorable notices. "People will come out of the woodwork for anything Beatles," according to one orchestra manager.

And there is the phenomenon of established rock artists going classical: Elvis Costello will make an appearance on the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's new Pops Rocks series for a program that includes his orchestral work *Il Sogno*. The series will also include the U.S. orchestra debut of hipster-

CST Entertainment Productions
Presents
Caribbean Sound
Steel Pan & World Music Ensemble

"Caribbean Sound was the highlight of our Family Series."
Cecil Cole, Artistic Administrator
Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra

Classical • Jazz • Patriotic • World
Pops, Family & YPC Programs

Contact
Barry Olsavsky
CST Entertainment Productions
(904) 268-2849
bopanman@earthlink.net
www.caribbeansound.net

ave Ben Folds. He is expected to draw an audience that skews even younger than the 30- to 50-year-old targeted demographic. "Everyone is talking about reaching new audiences," says Dori Armor, director of community programming. She notes that Ben Folds' name was greeted with enthusiasm by young orchestra staff members, but it didn't register with anyone over the age of 35. The Pops Rocks series, with its edgier marketing materials and choice of artists, shows that the orchestra is thinking "a little more out of the box," says Armor, and that the BSO "is looking at what's out there on the horizon."

But other pops programmers have started to wonder how they will ever appeal to an audience of even younger adults that has come of age listening to hip-hop. As Toeplitz politely describes it, that "more rhythmic style of music" may never find a comfortable fit with orchestras, no matter how gracefully 50 Cent

and his fan base ages.

Then again, who ever thought that Elton John would turn up with the Philly Pops, or that Metallica would take the stage with the San Francisco Symphony?

Orchestras needn't reflexively turn to star performers. The pops-concert formula that originated in the 19th century with menus of light classics and Viennese waltzes—the popular music of the day—still reigns at many orchestras, although the classics might be paired with a segment of John Williams film scores or highlights from the immensely popular *Lord of the Rings* *Symphony*. Pops programs are also a place to introduce new forms of music or instrumentation. In July, the Minneapolis Pops Orchestra premiered *Flying Dragon* Concerto by Chinese composer and pipa virtuoso Gao Hong, on a program of works billed as having strong national character, including music of Ecuador and Peru, along with Saint-Saens's *Algerian Suite*.

All of which attracts audience members looking to hear some classical music they recognize, or who are out for an evening's entertainment. Orchestras have often seemed a tad uncomfortable in their relationships to pops. Ty Johnson catches and corrects himself when he realizes he's referred to pops programs as "the product." The word conjures a little too much of the business—the show business—side of presenting concerts, just as Denny Young refers to orchestras expanding their fan—not patron—base.

But maybe orchestras can learn a thing or two from the language of their pops brethren with regard to putting on a show, er, program. "You can enlighten audience all you want, but if you don't entertain them, they won't come back," says Johnson. ∞

Rebecca Winzenried is managing editor of SYMPHONY.

CORKS ARE POPPING!

TO THE SOUND OF SENSATIONAL ORCHESTRAL MUSIC FOR POPS CONCERTS FROM CARL FISCHER MUSIC

Samuel Adler:
Paul Basler:
Henry Brant:
Carolyn Bremer:
Christopher Brubeck:

American Airs and Dances.....15'
Mangulina (Dominican Dance).....5'
Whoopie in D (Overture for a Fine Orchestra).....4'
Early Light.....6'
CityVisions (Concert Overture).....10'
Concerto for Bass Trombone and Orchestra.....13'
Convergence for Pops Orchestra.....17'
American Fanfare.....4'
Griffelkin (Parade).....3'
Much Ado (Overture for Orchestra).....10'
Suddenly.....6'
Overture to Spring (1999).....8'

Lukas Foss:

Daron Aric Hagen:

Leo Kraft:
**M. Leontovich/
Peter J. Wilhousky:**

Peter Mennin:
Lyndol Mitchell:
Ron Nelson:
Amadeo Roldan:
Elie Siegmeister:

Carol of the Bells (arr. by Sean O'Loughlin).....3'30"
Folk Overture.....8'
Kentucky Mountain Portraits (No. 3): Shivaree.....4'30"
Savannah River Holiday.....8'
La Rebambaramba (Carnival Ballet Suite).....11'
American Holiday.....8'30"

To order a perusal score for any of these works please call:
(610) 592-1222, Ext. 225/226 (Theodore Presser Rental Library)
or e-mail: rental@presser.com

For information on these composers and their music contact:
Phone: (212) 777-0900, Ext. 228 / Fax: (212) 477-3382
or email: barryo@carlfischer.com



CARL FISCHER
SINCE 1872

60 Bleecker St.
New York, NY 10012
www.carlfischer.com