# The Classical Beat

## By Stephen Dankner

### ORCHESTRAS DEPEND ON STARS, THEMES TO LURE AUDIENCES

With the winter holiday season just past, we're in a bit of the doldrums before the spring college and series concert season starts up. This is a brief and welcome period of beneficial repose – a good time to contemplate music both familiar and new, to catch up on listening to CDs, and for this listener, to ruminate on some of the trends on the classical scene that constitute our collective concert experience.

Despite the constant doom and gloom scenario we often read about and worry over, classical music appears to be doing all right. Sure, the graying of the audience is a cause for concern, and ticket sales to big-ticket symphony and opera events are dominated by the star power of famous soloists and divas; but that has always been the case. Ever since Franz Liszt, around 1850 in recital and orchestral appearances, turned his piano sideways so his female admirers could swoon at his leonine profile, soloists have fueled the cult of the artist/celebrity. It's no different today. Look at Joshua Bell, Hilary Hahn and Anne-Sophie Mutter just among the violinists. Opera singers, too, need to look like they have personal trainers, if they would aspire to fame and fortune. Of course, you still have to have phenomenal vocal ability to back up those good looks. Anna Netrebko and Renee Fleming are the reigning diva role models who define what it means to be classical superstars within our celebrity culture.

Another manifestation of extra-musical influence on concerts these days is thematic programming. The traditional program used to resemble a timeline of music history. For an orchestral concert, you had the curtain raiser - usually a Beethoven overture (Coriolan, Egmont or Leonore No. 3,) followed by a classical symphony (almost never Haydn) or concerto, which comprised the first half of the concert. After the intermission came the 'big piece' – a Brahms, Dvorak or Mahler symphony (Nos. 1 or 4,) for example. Most conductors, for practically all the concerts I attended in my youth, ascribed to this universal template. Wasn't it the same for you? There were exceptions: a modern piece or even a premiere might be programmed second; it would never be after the intermission, though, because any new

piece would certainly empty the hall if a large-scale audience favorite preceded it. Conductors quickly learned that audiences would endure fear and loathing before intermission to hear a longed-for masterwork afterwards.

By contrast, in our area we are fortunate that Ronald Feldman and David Alan Miller are dedicated to new music and to cultivating a high degree of interest in it for the sophisticated audiences for their respective orchestras, the Berkshire Symphony and Albany Symphony.

Under the modern rubric of thematic programming, all the music on a given program has to "go" or blend into a seamless progression of aural continuity. The progression of music resembling a museum or gallery exhibition is the objective. How is this done? Concerts can be assembled in several ways: National identity/ethnic origins (the Berkshire Symphony's recent "The Americans"); the legacy of a specific tradition in diverse composers' music (the Albany Symphony's "Memories of the Old Country"); a musical "snapshot" of an era and place (again, the Berkshire Symphony's "The Viennese"); the cross-pollinating effect of one style upon another (say, jazz on classical, such as Milhaud-Gershwin-Ravel-Bernstein,) a one-composer tour-de-force (an all-Gershwin pops concert, or the BSO's upcoming Elliott Carter festival at Tanglewood in July) and many other possibilities designed to market the music.

Does it really matter to listeners if there's a perceptible logic and blend in programming? Perhaps not. The clear message in thematic programming is that we are being shown, or taught, as in a 'Young Person's' concert, to make musical connections. But since we can only hear one piece at a time (unless we're listening to Ives or Berio,) I don't think the previous non-thematic music we've just heard will deleteriously spill over onto the piece we're about to hear, like ketchup into our dish of ice cream.

In October 2006, I attended the premiere of a work composed for the Nuremberg Symphony. On the same program was the "Prelude" to Die Meistersinger (naturally,) "An American in Paris" and Aaron Copland's "Third Symphony." Thematically, it made no sense – each of the four pieces was grossly dissimilar to the other three. Yet, it made little difference. The audience accepted each work on its own terms and there were no discernible musical conflicts. Each piece had something unique to say, and the audience was receptive – perhaps more so than if the programming was didactically thematic.

With or without a thematic agenda, when music on a program is thus composer-driven, and not either simply a vehicle for a celebrity virtuoso, or predictably staid and 'classical,' then the music itself rightfully becomes the attraction. Then, we don't go to "see" a concert, as even the most experienced concertgoer will sometimes unwittingly say – we go as listeners. Considering that each and every composition is a unique work of art, I'm reminded of Gustav Mahler's effusion about his own music, and what, in his mind a symphony is: "it must express the world!"

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