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Ed Sullivan

Photo alteration by Jeff Dunn

How to Build a Season

By [Jeff Dunn](#)

Ed Sullivan, it is said, had a surefire method for putting together a successful show: Open big, schedule a good comedy act, put in something for children, and keep it clean. If only planning a symphony season were that easy. Sticking to Sullivan's formula, a symphony would need to start each concert with something like Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man*, move on to a piece by, say, Offenbach, add *Peter and the Wolf*, and avoid anything dissonant.

No, it's far more complicated than that. Just how complicated emerged in a series of conversations with music directors and support staff from symphony orchestras around the Bay Area.

The basic steps seem simple enough: (1) Bring proposals to the table; (2) discuss and vet with advisory staff; (3) run a feasibility check; (4) make necessary adjustments; and (5) schedule. But the devil is in the details.

Picking and Choosing

And who exactly brings these pieces to the table? Obviously, music directors have a lot to do with this, and they have their personal preferences. For example, Michael Tilson Thomas does well with Russian repertoire (as justified by several Grammy awards for Russian compositions) and is devoted to American music. Bruno Ferrandis, the new music director of the Santa Rosa Symphony, is a specialist in French and European works, as well as those from Latin America.

Good directors also have their ears open to what's going on in the concert world, and discover pieces making a splash elsewhere that may also mesh with their artistic goals. Once a piece has been brought to their attention, or recalled from past experience, a director may obtain a recording or scores from publishers for further consideration. Some, like Lorin Maazel and Esa-Pekka Salonen — and MTT here in the Bay Area — are composers themselves, and grab the golden opportunity to share that talent with the public (MTT will do this with *two* of his opuses, *Agnegram* and *Notturmo*, at the end of this month).

In proposing repertoire, music directors also must think of their own and their orchestra's artistic growth, and take on challenges from time to time. But they must wait for the right moment. For Michael Morgan, music director of the Oakland East Bay Symphony, an example was Leonard Bernstein's Mass three seasons ago.

"I've wanted to do the Mass for 15 years," he said in an interview at the time. "With the state of things in the world it's an extremely timely piece. [Hearing it] is a very different experience when there is a war on. When there is no war it seems quaint, dated ... but with a war on, the Mass could have been written today."

Now waiting in the wings for Morgan is a "big piece," the Shostakovich Eighth Symphony, and even farther out, if ever, the long-breathed, cathedral-building symphonies of Anton Bruckner. "I love Bruckner, but it takes a patience that I don't have right now," he says.

But repertoire doesn't come just from directors' heads; others may get an opportunity to be heard informally. Orchestra players sometimes make suggestions. And a conducting student of Morgan's, Omid Zoufonoun, brought his attention to the worthiness of Persian music, so this March, OEBS will play a concerto by Aminollah Hossein and a suite by the Persian-Armenian composer Loris Tjeknavorian. Living composers send in scores, like unsolicited screenplays are sent to the Hollywood studios — every so often someone strikes the jackpot. Patrons, board members, and others may send in CDs of music for consideration.

Yet another source of repertoire comes from visiting conductors and soloists, but not always. In the case of the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra, the entire repertoire used to be chosen by Kent Nagano, but now that he's leaving and a series of visiting conductors are auditioning for the music director position, candidates were asked to provide their own program, with some level of premiere on each program to "show them off" and reflect their tastes. Hugh Wolf will conduct the West Coast premiere of Aaron Jay Kernis' *Overture in Feet and Meters* on Feb. 21, Guillermo Figueroa will present the U.S. premiere of his fellow Puerto Rican Roberto Sierra's *Boriken* on March 13, and Laura Jackson will introduce the West Coast premiere of Susan Botti's *Translucence* on April 2.

Nearly every concert has a "concerted" work in which a soloist is featured as prominently as the orchestra. The source of the music in that case may be either the symphonic organization, or the soloist. In the former, a work is selected and a player is found later who can perform it. In the latter, the soloist is selected first — in most cases one with a big draw, and often far in advance — and when the program's being planned, soloists may offer the orchestra a choice of works currently in their repertoire or of interest.

Talking It Over

At some point in the process, key members of the symphony administration come together to chat. Who are these people and what can they bring to the mix?



Midnight Modern Conversation by William Hogarth, aka, *Season-Programming Conversation*

The individual titles vary from organization to organization. There is an executive in overall charge of the financial

success of the organization, such as the executive director, general manager, CFO, or president. Working with the executive are usually people who handle marketing (who promote the season in ways that will attract the public) and development (who seek out donors to sponsor particular concerts and soloists). The San Francisco Symphony, with its enormous season, has an additional resource, Gregg Gleasner, director of artistic planning, who is “most directly involved in repertoire and artists” as an advisor and intermediary, according to Gary Ginstling, director of communications and external affairs.

The purpose of the discussion phase is to look at the proposed works using a wide variety of criteria and then to begin to assemble programs, often far beyond the next season. Gleasner, for instance, “is almost completely done booking for 2009-2010 and working on 2010-2011 already,” says Ginstling.

What are the criteria? An obvious one, high on all orchestras’ lists, is when the organization last performed the work in question. The Santa Rosa Symphony has a policy of waiting at least five years for any repeat performance. (Not necessarily so for the San Francisco Symphony, though: The Shostakovich Fifth Symphony has enjoyed a streak of three seasons in a row so far.)

The next highest criterion, after allowing for selected visiting conductors’ and soloists’ preferences, is the most intangible and artistic one: the right “mix” of pieces. Suzanne Crawford, marketing director of the Marin Symphony, wants a range of new and familiar music that “will both stretch and appease existing audiences, and draw new audiences.” Ferrandis, in Santa Rosa, holds the art of building the perfect program in high regard. He says he wants “innovation with a strong, solid base, a mix, a contrast of styles and means.”

Going along with (or against) the mix is the concept of a theme, dear to the heart of marketing departments, that holds together pieces with a common thread and may (or may not, if poorly conceived) attract audiences through promotional materials. The Bay Area’s regional orchestras all display themes prominently in their literature. For instance, the Marin Symphony’s themes include a “Screen Gems” concert of classical music used in films, and a “Red Violin” concert using the red “Mendelssohn” violin that inspired the film of the same name.

The San Francisco Symphony, on the other hand, prefers to restrict themes to festivals and holiday concerts. It also has ongoing initiatives, outside of concerts alone, that influence programming, such as the recordings of the Mahler cycle, and preparations for world tours. The Symphony Silicon Valley has taken the step of using an innovative theme trademarked by the Chicago Symphony, “[Beyond the Score.](#)” The “beyond” part occurs in the first half of the concert, during which a narrator gives a background lecture extensively illustrated with multimedia effects, live musical examples from the orchestra, and a script portrayed by an actor. In the second half, the music is played straight. This year’s selection is Stravinsky’s [Rite of Spring](#).

Facing the Great Unknown

After considering the mix and themes, there is timing: The season should begin and end with a bang; holidays and anniversaries of composers, orchestras, and conductors should be taken into account (one reason for the deluge of Shostakovich — 2006 was his centenary). After timing considerations, numerous other factors can intrude. “What kind of tie-in social events can we plan around any particular program?” asks Crawford of the Marin Symphony. “Are the pieces all in the same key?” asks Morgan of OEBS to ensure tonal variety.

Finally, there is the problem of cost. Are extra forces required? Will the concert stay within union limits for overtime (two and a quarter to two and a half hours)? Can an inexpensive concert balance out one that is much more expensive? Will the mix and the theme attract special donors?

And after the known factors, there are the elements of chance. Sometimes things go wrong, scores don’t arrive in time for rehearsal, soloists become ill, a commissioned work is too long (such as Robin Holloway’s [Fourth Concerto](#) for the San Francisco Symphony). In those events, we might hear a program that has been retooled at the last minute.

So it's quite an adventure, putting a season together, filled with suspense, excitement, and plain hard work. I sometimes wonder, though, what it would be like if the symphony officials had Ed Sullivan on their team. I can just see him sitting down with them, discussing Mozart, and saying the same thing he said about Elvis: "A real decent, fine boy. Give him a slot!"

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Comments

One programming criteria that trumps all others for us is to listen to the music as programs. Programs are not theoretical assemblages but live presentations. How the works flow one into the next and what the impact of the overall evening's experience is the ultimate test of the success or failure of a program.

Length also matters as certain works are wonderful but taxing while others could go on forever. One wants audiences to feel refreshed not exhausted at the end of a concert if we want them to wish to return.

A final added point is the challenges posed by the music matched with the rehearsal time available. Certain works require more rehearsal time and that has to be measured against the needs of the other pieces on a program to make certain we can perform each work to its optimal level of success.

Posted by Andrew Bales on February 20, 2008 at 8:26 pm

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