Early Music on the Radio

The landscape is changing, and the implications are crucial for early music performers

By Angela Mariani

If you’re under the age of 90, it may be difficult to imagine radio’s initial impact on the listening public. The implications for the dissemination of news and information alone were mind-boggling, even without the extra candy of having entertainment piped directly into your living room and hearing music that you probably would never have encountered otherwise. Even today, when I ask people “Where did you first hear early music?” the most frequent answer I get is, “On the radio.”

If I were to do my survey 10 years from now, however, the most frequent answer might be different. It used to be that there were basically two ways in which early music occurred on the radio: stations routinely incorporated early music into their daily playlists, or they broadcast local or syndicated programs devoted to early music. Now, there are some new kids on the block: satellite radio, Internet broadcasts, also known as webcasts, and the most recent addition to the neighborhood, podcasts. Listeners now have an unprecedented number of ways by which to get a daily fix of early music, and performers can find more opportunities to be heard.

A great many classical radio stations, public or commercial, routinely incorporate early music into their daily playlists. To catalog them all would be almost impossible given the scope of this article; program schedules for almost all radio stations can be found on their websites. The nature of early music programming on local stations varies; some work it into the playlist throughout the course of the day, some emphasize early music during certain hours, and some produce programs as specific as Derek Blackwell’s Mostly Medieval program on KBCS-Seattle. (See sidebar for more information about steps you can take to encourage local stations to add more early music programming.)

National syndication

Syndicated programs and services, such as NPR’s Performance Today and PRI’s Classical 24, also offer liberal helpings of early music to their listeners, and they do so on a daily basis. Classical 24, produced by American Public Media and distributed by Public Radio International, is a nationally syndicated music service providing classical music 24/7. This means that affiliate stations, for a fee, can plug into Classical 24’s programming for all or part of their on-air programming, allowing them to automate part of their broadcast. On a randomly chosen day, the Classical 24 playlist yielded an anonymous Medieval song played by Ensemble Alcatraz, Renaissance dances played by the Baltimore Consort, 15th-century fanfares, and works by Holborne, Biber, Susato, Gibbons, Weiss, and Vivaldi, as well as multiple works by Bach. A quick scan of the offerings on several other days confirmed that early music is alive and well on Classical 24.

The weekly one-hour early music program called Millennium of Music (www.classictoday.com/mom) is produced by Radman Productions in Washington, D.C. The program’s creator and host, Robert Aubry Davis, is a prolific broadcaster, writer, speaker, and performer as well as an ardent and eloquent advocate for early music; he has premiered hundreds of early music recordings by the finest performers in the field and is extremely active in TV broadcasting, public radio, and satellite radio. His other regularly syndicated programs include The European Centuries and Songs for Aging Children (which has a focus on singer-songwriters). Millennium of Music features music “for the thousand years before the birth of Bach,” including “the evolution of sacred music, east and west,” live performances, and new releases. Millennium of Music also annually broadcasts concerts from the Holland Early Music Festival at Utrecht. Millennium was originally produced at WETA-FM in Washington; this changed recently. “After 35 years as a station serving the classical music community,” explains Davis, “WETA has gone the way of many public stations and become all news/talk. They received 10,000 letters of protest, many of which named Millennium of Music as a primary loss.” Despite this setback, the program continues to thrive; Millennium is syndicated by WCLV in Cleveland and is available on over 160 public radio stations and on three of XM Satellite Radio’s channels.
Sunday Baroque is a four-hour Sunday morning program dedicated to music before 1750 (www.sundaybaroque.org); it is syndicated by National Public Radio in cooperation with WSHU in Fairfield, Connecticut, with production assistance from WGUC in Cincinnati. Sunday Baroque was created by host Suzanne Bona, a classically trained professional flutist who has also been a professional broadcaster since 1987; she serves as announcer and program director at WSHU and as executive producer of cultural affairs at WGUC. (An interview with Suzanne Bona may be found at www.wguc.org/hosts/suzanne.asp). Sunday Baroque emphasizes the Baroque era, but its playlist includes a generous helping of music from the Renaissance and earlier eras. Information about the availability of Sunday Baroque in your area can be found through NPR’s website (www.npr.org).

Harmonia is a one-hour weekly program produced and syndicated nationally by WFIU at Indiana University, with production assistance from KOHM in Lubbock, TX. Harmonia covers the whole spectrum of historical performance, featuring a mix of historical “theme” segments, guest interviews, new releases, and live recordings from concerts and festivals (including annual features from the Boston Early Music Festival and the Bloomington Early Music Festival). For the past 14 years, I’ve been the writer, host, and producer of Harmonia, which began as a local program in 1991. WFIU syndicated the program in 1995, and since then it has been carried on around 180 stations in the U.S.A. We’ve recently welcomed Catherine Hawkes and Wolodymyr Smishkewych to our WFIU writing staff; they and WFIU’s fantastic production engineer Mike Paskash make it possible for me to continue to write and host Harmonia programs while performing and teaching full-time at Texas Tech University. Harmonia’s website carries program listings, playlists, carriage lists, “streamed” archive programs, and lots of other information (www.harmonia.indiana.edu).

Other successful syndicated early music radio shows have aired in the past, like Ross Duffin’s Micrologus; Exploring the World of Early Music and Bravo Baroque, hosted by Nan O’Neill, but the format itself is facing challenges. “Syndicated programs are in trouble,” says Robert Aubry Davis. “Even news/talk as a national format is declining. Narrowcasting (as in the cable industry) is surely the future and salvation. I now present three to 10 hours per day of early music on my VOX channel on XM Satellite Radio — every day new audiences are discovering this repertoire.” This brings us to the next category of early music broadcasting.

Satellite radio

Satellite radio is a digital radio service that, for a subscription fee, provides multiple channels of commercial-free radio programming to its listeners. In order to take advantage of these offerings, the listener has to purchase a special radio that can receive feeds from the satellite service; these radios have screens that display playlist information. A number of different equipment configurations enable listeners to access satellite radio by either adding it to an existing stereo system or installing a

For Listeners: Want to Hear More Early Music on Your Local Radio Station?

It may help radio listeners to understand that there are common programming patterns when it comes to local classical radio programming. A huge percentage of early music programmed on the radio, especially during daytime hours, is Baroque chamber music. Renaissance polyphony is also heard fairly often, although it’s sometimes reserved for early mornings, evenings, and Sundays. Early music that is considered to appeal only to a very particular taste — early opera, solo keyboard music other than Bach, and, alas, most Medieval music — often suffers the same fate as contemporary classical music and is considered not-for-prime-time.

But before you call and accuse the radio programmers of being Philistines, it’s important to understand that they are responding to a complicated set of criteria. Commercial stations have to satisfy their advertisers, and a 12-stanza a cappella crusade song in Medieval French may not sell too many SUVs (Volvos, maybe). The phones at public radio stations may go silent when they play Machaut but ring off the hook when they play Mozart; programmers will respond in kind. (Unfortunately, this results in a self-fulfilling prophecy — if you only play Machaut at 11 p.m., who’s going to call?) Programmers are also keenly aware of what their audiences will be doing while they’re listening. If it’s drive time, and lots of their listeners are on the freeway navigating traffic and munching Egg McMuffins, they’re not going to program music that requires a very concentrated kind of attention. During that time of day, listeners want something uplifting, familiar, and short — they don’t want to have to wait in the parking lot to find out what they’ve been listening to.

So what steps can one take to encourage the programming of more early music on the radio? The best thing you can do is respond to what you hear (or don’t hear) and offer feedback. Be canny about fund drives, and call in your pledge when you hear something you like. (Programmers absolutely do notice when a program garners 20 calls in the first minute or when a particular piece seems to result in a flurry of calls.) One caveat about listener feedback: please be aware that programming changes take place slowly. Remember that for everything a programmer adds, something else is taken away, and they’re going to hear from the proponents of whatever got bumped in order to play your estampies. Also, please be polite. Simply use consideration and discretion.

Listeners who call constantly to complain or to nag the announcers, who have no say in programming decisions, are about as welcome as stalkers and about as likely to have their requests honored.
For Performers: Tips for Sending Promotional CDs to Radio Hosts

In my work with Harmonia, I’ve had a number of performers tell me that they noticed a spike in sales right after a new CD was featured on the program. Producers, writers, and hosts welcome the receipt of new releases, and that goes for producers and hosts of satellite radio and webcasts as well as local and syndicated radio programs. Websites are a handy way to find the contact information for the person who makes programming decisions.

If you really want your CD to stand out, include a radio programmer’s guide when sending promotional copies. A programmer’s guide should contain the following:

- A complete list of titles and timings, with “pronuncers,” as we radio people call them. Don’t use the International Phonetic Alphabet – use analogous syllables in colloquial English (YOH-han suh-BAS-tee-an Bock, or ghee-YOME duh mah-SHOW.) Don’t worry if it looks goofy. We don’t care. We’d rather say it right.

- A one-paragraph, conversational-style description of the CD’s contents.

- A one-sentence description that might be helpful to a programmer dealing with each piece: “this short, energetic dance is a great drive-time piece,” or “this charming set of songs, with its folk-like melodies and string-band instrumentation, would make a great transitional set from a classical to a more folk-oriented program, or vice-versa.”

The above will endear you to every announcer who is facing a huge pile of new releases on the table and a four-minute window before the NPR news; including a guide is also very likely to get your CD placed on top of the stack. A few more suggestions:

Consider making a CD of short (1:00 or less) interview segments telling about the music on the CD and describing individual pieces. Include this with promotional CDs. (A downloadable version of this is also a great addition to a website.)

If you are sending a recording of a live performance, include the following:

- A complete list of pieces, in order, including separate movements and labeled with the appropriate CD track.

- Timings for each piece, including separate timings for each movement (in other words, for each track). This is crucial – no one in radio has time to sit by a CD player timing the movements on your recording – and yet it’s the one thing most commonly omitted by performers.

- List all the performers, including soloists (and the tracks on which the various soloists are featured). If anyone’s name is more complicated than John Smith, include name pronuncers.

Consider making copies of your CD available to your local public radio station as a fundraising “premium.”

If you have a winter holiday CD, send it in September or before.

Include information about a website that listeners can access to obtain your CD.

Include a contact number or e-mail address for yourself or your ensemble.

I once overheard a public radio announcer at a conference say casually to a friend, “Oh, if there’s a composer on a CD I can’t pronounce, I just don’t play the thing.” So much for Guirault de Bornelh.

completely new system to home or car. You can also listen to satellite radio via the Internet, although this medium also requires a subscription fee.

Many satellite channels broadcast everything from syndicated programs to live performances and guest interviews. And, because of the sheer number of available channels coming from a given service, satellite radio services can afford to broadcast programming devoted to a very specific music genre (the Sirius network has a 24/7 Elvis channel!).

The first digital satellite radio service in the U.S.A. was XM Satellite Radio (www.xmradio.com), whose broadcast center is located in Washington, D.C. XM, going strong with over five million subscribers and 150 channels of programming, has a mind-boggling 67 music channels, three of which are devoted exclusively to classical music programming. Robert Aubry Davis’s Millennium of Music program is featured on three XM channels (VOX, hosted by Davis, Martin Goldsmith’s XM Classics channel, and the public radio channel). According to Davis, “the XM database is the largest ever dedicated to an art form – over 120,000 gigabytes, all for music.”

The other major satellite radio broadcasting company in the U.S.A. is Sirius Satellite Radio (www.sirius.com), headquartered in New York City. Sirius also has three Classical channels: Symphony Hall, Classical Voices, and Sirius Pops. Sirius’s Symphony Hall channel has a Sunday morning early music program called SIRIUS-ly Baroque.

An array of multiple-channel music offerings can also be acquired from digital cable TV providers. Listings vary from one provider to another. (Cox, which happens to be the local digital cable provider in my location, offers programs such as Sunday morning’s Breakfast and Baroque on their Classical Masterpieces channel, and other early music is programmed at various times throughout the day.)

Webcasting

There are literally hundreds of places to hear an early music broadcast streamed on the Internet. Some require
a subscription fee, while others do not. “Webcasting is available as ‘live’ broadcast as well as ‘pre-loaded,’” explains Predrag Gosta, who programs and hosts Earlymusic.net Radio. “Most of our own program is pre-loaded and then broadcast through the Internet using the interface that works in conjunction with our station. We usually have 10-15 hours of music pre-loaded, so the chance of hearing the same composition during a short time is very small.” Who’s listening? In the case of Earlymusic.net Radio, Gosta says, “The majority of people (40%) are between 30 and 45 years old, with other age groups being split almost equally.”

Here are a few good places, among the hundreds offered, to get you started in becoming familiar with webcasts:

- Classical Live Online Radio (www.classicalwebcast.com) is described as “an attempt to collect all live-broadcasting classical radio stations on the web.” The site includes radio stations that stream as well as online-only broadcasts and links to an extensive annotated chart that lists a huge number of classical stations, including for each information, software requirements, and site links.

- Earlymusic.net Radio is available through www.live365.com, a huge site that claims to make over 10,000 webcasts available to subscribers. This includes over 220 classical webcasts, among which I also found the following programs: “The Baroque Masters,” “The Unknown Baroque,” “Early Music to the 17th Century,” and “Baroque Online” – and I hit these four after only scrolling through about 150 of the site’s offerings.

- Allegro! (www.jraboil.net/radio) links web users to real-time on-air webstreams of stations that carry various music programs. This is an amazing timesaver and can rescue you from the dreary task of clicking through carriage list links to see which stations stream.

- Through its website, Early Music America offers a series of 24 free, one-minute informational radio spots on various early music topics. These can be downloaded (www.earlymusic.org/Content/Resources/RadioResources.htm) and either played on the air or streamed on a station’s website. The spots are written and narrated by Maria Coldwell, Early Music America’s executive director, and were produced with the help of KINK-FM in Seattle.

Some record companies are also getting into the world of streaming. Naxos’s webcasting site offers its subscribers over 60 channels, five of which are dedicated to early music (www.naxosradio.com).

Don’t hesitate to be creative when searching the web – just remember, since the Internet has no central quality control, it’s caveat emptor. Also, don’t rule out non-classical sites; you never know where you’ll find early music. (One of Live365.com’s channels, Radio Rivendell, features “Folk, Renaissance, Medieval and other generally good music from Middle Earth,” and “poems and comments on the Third Age of Middle Earth.”)

**Podcasting**

It sounds like science fiction, but chances are your 12-year-old already knows what a podcast is. According to the website Live365.com, a podcast is a “regularly-updated mp3 audio show that is made available to listeners over the Internet in a way that allows scheduling and automatic downloading for listening at a later date.” All you need is a computer with an Internet connection, and podcasting software that downloads the regularly updated podcasts from the various feeds to which you are subscribed. You can listen from your own computer, or you can download the file to your iPod – hence the term podcasting.

Listeners now have an unprecedented number of ways by which to get a daily fix of early music, and performers can find more opportunities to be heard. The implications of this, of course, are enormous for both listeners and performers. For listeners, podcasting renders an iPod (or any analogous mp3 player) into a self-programmed radio station with a virtually unlimited playlist. Podcasting also provides yet another outlet for performers who want to disseminate their music over the Internet. And we’re not just talking about CDs – a subscriber could sign up to receive regular podcasts of a particular ensemble’s concert performances. The possibilities are endless!

**Sorting it all out**

Clearly, audio broadcasting has come to mean much more than just radio. Will the new technology render radio obsolete? “I don’t think that ‘normal’ radio broadcasting will be replaced soon by webcasting,” says Predrag Gosta. “Even with good programming, there are several factors to consider. For quality music, mp3 files need to be streamed at 128K or higher; that means that most customers need fast Internet access, and that is still not the case, with the older generation in particular. Also, many big radio stations offer Internet broadcasts in addition to regular broadcast. Finally, there are so many stations available on the Internet today that the competition for a new station to get noticed is huge.” Nevertheless, the landscape is changing, and the implications are crucial for early music performers, who are accustomed to using radio as an important means of getting their music heard (see sidebar on page 22).

The situation is also complicated by the symbiotic relationship between performers, radio stations, and record companies, which are also facing a completely different future as a result of new technology. As Robert Aubry Davis points out, “Radio has changed dramatically since Angel printed the statistic that if a recording was featured on Millennium, sales would increase 15% – that was back when CD sales were meaningful. Now, even the best sellers rarely crack 20,000 copies in the classical field.”

Then what role, if any, can radio play in helping early music performers? Davis suggests that we might be asking the wrong question. “Is this actually the wrong model? Is radio truly relevant? One may point to the success of Fred Renz’s Early Music New York – a little airplay around Christmas, a concert series at the Met, a new CD every year or so – but even without distribution or

Continued on page 46
substantial airplay, he sells on-site far more than any major release from major classical label, with only the tiniest handful of exceptions.”

Despite the challenges faced by both radio and the recording industry, many people in the field are exploring how new technology can help broadcasters partner with arts organizations and performers. One example of this is the Classical Music Initiative developed by American Public Media and hailed as a “production fund for the development of new concepts, programs, and talent in classical music production, as well as for exploring digital and Internet delivery of classical music programming” (http://classicalmusicinitiative.publicradio.org). APM’s publication Classical Radio 101: A Primer for Performing Arts Partnerships addresses ways to reach and serve audiences through radio. The primer explains how radio programs are created, gives information about building partnerships between public radio, performers, and arts organizations, and offers valuable information about resources for fundraising, using the web, audience building, and so on.

Let’s hope radio stays around for a while – it’s the only broadcast medium that’s still free, that doesn’t require you to have the money to buy a computer or an iPod, and that reaches the most people from the widest economic spectrum. In the meantime, while listeners with the means to do so explore the new technology, we performers would do well to continue cultivating our radio contacts while exploring creative uses of the new technology. Send promotional CDs to satellite service hosts and webcasters as well as radio broadcasters. Podcast some live performances. Create educational tools that can be streamed, webcast, or podcast. The array of possibilities is incredibly exciting – let’s grab the wave at its crest and ride it in. 

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