

Should new media mainly be used as a support for live performance?  
by Gerald Mertens (Germany)

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

Please let me begin my considerations to the topic with three short questions and three short answers:

1. Question: do the successful performance of Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony or Carl Orff's "Carmina Burana" need the use of new media in addition to the orchestra, the choir, the soloist and the conductor? The answer is: No!

2. Question: does the scenic performance of Richard Wagner's operas "Flying Dutchman", "Walküre" or "God dawn" need a video projection on the stage with waves, clouds or fires? The answer is: could be, but does not necessarily have to.

3. Question: can the use of a film or a video projection in a concert facilitate the approach and the understanding of a music piece? The clear answer is: Yes!

Three nearly identical scenarios, but three different answers.

Let me start with the third example. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra developed a new concert format in the season 2006/2007. The title: "CSO Beyond the Score - Classical Music - Exposed". The orchestra and the conductor (in this case, Pierre Boulez) appear, together with two actors as speakers. The hall becomes dark, a film begins. 1914: Documentary film scenes of the beginning of World War 1. Dying soldiers, devastated battlegrounds. In a dramatic dialogue, the two speakers comment live the historical development, diary entries, poems. End of war. The 1920s: view of Hungary, view of Budapest. We see the collapse after World War 1, the end of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy, political unrests, murders. The film shows pictures and paintings mirroring this time. During the film, the orchestra starts playing Bartok's exciting piece "The Miraculous Mandarin". Composed in 1919 it was influenced by history processes, social confusions of the time. The music also deals around the story of a prostitute. The public is led, without further previous knowledge, into the time of origin of the score. Similar concert projects by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra have received inspired reactions and, even to a skilled public, completely new aspects of an actually well-known composition were imparted.

My recommendation: browse the internet. With Google or Youtube, search "CSO Beyond the Score".

The film productions were very expensive and naturally have brought no financial profit. But the CSO wants to license it world-wide for further performances by other orchestras. One hopes to get medium-term profits from this licensing. Next pieces in this series are Richard Strauss' "A Hero's Life", Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 27, Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring", Shostakovich's 4<sup>th</sup> Symphony. From my point of view, a trend-setting project and a very good example of how new media - in this case, a film - can extend live-presentation of classical music with an orchestra.

Important: with this new way of presentation, the classical audience and the new grown-ups - which do not have considerable previous knowledge - are addressed the same way. It is also important to bear in mind that the concert hall must have a good video and sound equipments.

Let's come back to the second example: the use of film and video in the opera and on the stage. Projection and laser technology met a rapid development in the last few years. As the new technical equipment (hardware and software) are quite expensive, only large opera houses and theatres can afford them. But when the technical means are available, why not perform Richard Wagner's opera *Flying Dutchman* without high waves on video? The current Bayreuth Festival production of the *Flying Dutchman* would not be conceivable without a video projection.

However, from both examples (Chicago and Bayreuth) a danger becomes clear: if large orchestras and opera houses set new trends and standards by the implementation of new media and new techniques, there is a risk that smaller orchestras and concert halls cannot keep up any longer, particularly for financial reasons, as the demands coming from audiences continue to rise.

Let's briefly look back at the development of sound recordings: the availability of first-class phonograms of premium international orchestras contributed to an increasing demand from the public

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for high musical and technical standards. This entailed a growing pressure on mid- and smallsize orchestras world-wide. Consciously or unconsciously, the listener compares his regional orchestra with the recordings of the Vienna, Berlin or New York Philharmonics, whose recordings are on his shelf. On the long run, this induces an unfair comparison, whereby smaller regional orchestras are put at a disadvantage.

However, as a result of this competition, the artistic standards of regional orchestras have been rising continuously over the last few years. I am firmly convinced that the experience of a live orchestra concert cannot be replaced by the development of new media and technologies.

Let's come back to the first example: Beethovens 9<sup>th</sup> symphony or Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. Their performance doesn't need to be supported by new media. I think we should be careful: orchestra performances of the core repertoire (baroque, classical, romantic and modern music) should remain authentic and the use of new media should not introduce any commercial gimmicks into it.

The Chicago example shows that the careful use of certain media can help experiencing new successful concert formats without negative impact on the music itself. On the contrary, such use can enrich the music. There are numerous examples showing that the use of new media can be of valuable help to marketing, advertisement and audience development of classical music.

Thank you for your attention!