

Pod Wave



As podcasts surge in quantity and popularity, orchestras, arts organizations, and musicians are experimenting with the format and reaching new audiences.

by Hannah Edgar

Podcasts: It seems like everyone has one. So goes the jibe about the medium—and with some 3,000 new podcasts created each month, that might not feel far off.

But it's just as fair to say that everyone is listening to podcasts, too. In April, Edison Research/Triton Digital reported that an estimated one in five Americans listen to podcasts weekly, a figure that has more than doubled in the last five years, and 41 percent of respondents reported listening to more podcasts than they had the year prior. Though listenership increased across demographics, notably, Americans ages 12 to 24 saw the greatest increase. The most

popular topic among those surveyed, besting even news and current affairs? Music.

That enough makes podcasting ripe for exploration by symphony orchestras and performing arts organizations. As an aural storytelling format about an aural art form, radio and podcasts both access an emotional immediacy that program notes, press notices, and music writing simply can't. But just as video streaming is starting to overtake traditional on-air television, podcasts' on-demand nature is making them an increasingly dominant medium. Many radio shows now make their episodes deliverable on podcast streaming services after airing, netting audiences who aren't



Courtesy Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra

In the studio recording a Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra “Fanfare Cincinnati” podcast, left to right: Chris Pinelo, CSO Vice President of Communications; CSO Associate Principal Percussion Michael Culligan (behind microphones); and CSO Percussion Richard Jensen.

terrestrial radio listeners. Among those shows are “New Sounds,” the WNYC program hosted for decades by John Schaefer, which posts all its 4,000-plus program episodes online. (“New Sounds” and “Soundcheck,” a second Schaefer-hosted program, narrowly avoided an untimely demise in October, when New York Public Radio

it takes to cook a quick meal. For podcast producers, barriers to entry are negligible: All someone needs to create a podcast is a way to record their own voice, audio editing software, and access to the internet for uploading the finished product.

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announced it was going to “sunset” both shows; after widespread listener outcry, the station reversed its decision, and the shows continued.)

The move toward podcasting mirrors broad shifts in how we consume goods and entertainment and transact business. Orchestras that ignore these shifts could risk missing out on attracting a younger group of listeners and potential audience members. If you’re above a certain age, chances are you’re still watching cable TV; younger consumers were among the first to “cut the cord” and switch to streamed television. Driven by technology advances, people are increasingly using more flexible, convenient arrangements that allow us to stream a TV show or listen to a radio podcast on our phones or computers whenever we want. Additionally, unlike radio, podcasts aren’t beholden to a specific time frame, though the most successful tend to fall between 20 and 45 minutes long—the length of a commute, say, or the amount of time

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ceptions, the average podcast’s potential for monetization is low. But podcasts allow their creators to track listening habits, and they can use that information to attract program sponsors. Profitable podcasts support themselves through sponsorships, donations, merchandise, or ticketed live recording events. And while there’s no tried-and-true formula for what concepts will take off, thanks to the rankings and algorithms driving major podcast streaming services, even the most niche podcasts can reach unexpected audiences.

Violist Nadia Sirota learned this with her runaway hit “Meet the Composer,” the WQXR-produced podcast she hosted from 2015 until 2017. Her engaging interviews with living composers, interspersed with brief cuts of their music, attracted a listenership far beyond the new-music community. It ultimately garnered such a following that, in 2016, it became the second podcast ever to win a Peabody Award

for excellence in radio broadcasting. (*Serial*, the true-crime series credited with kicking off the podcast boom, was the first.) “We ended up being part of some kind of podcasting movement,” Sirota recalls. “I don’t think we were looking to a specific antecedent at that point.”

“Classical Classroom” and “Decomposed”

Dacia Clay also found herself on the vanguard of the podcasting wave more or less by accident when she started “Classical Classroom.” The popular podcast is geared towards newcomers to the genre and distributed by Houston Public Media and Seattle’s KING-FM, where Clay is the station’s creative director. A self-proclaimed “classical music newbie,” Clay says that when she first pitched the concept to Houston Public Media in 2013, few people even knew what a podcast was. She recalls, “We were Houston Public Media’s first pure podcast”—that is, a podcast that did not begin as a terrestrial radio program first. “It was a great time to get into podcasting because nothing was systematized in the industry. We didn’t think about profits or stats, and there were no real precedents to follow—as radio nerds, we just had genuine fun making a thing. I think that came across to our listeners.”



Maggie Wolley



Dacia Clay, a self-described classical-music newbie, hosts the podcast “Classical Classroom,” geared toward people just discovering the art form.

Of course, the podcast market has become much more saturated since “Classical Classroom” and “Meet the Composer,” classical music podcasts included. By the time pianist and arts lecturer Jade Simmons was approached by Minnesota Public Radio in 2018 to host its classical music podcast “Decomposed,” she accepted on two conditions: “We had to be doing something that hadn’t been done and was necessary,” Simmons says.

Each episode of “Decomposed” delves into one crucial thread or moment in music history. Nor does the podcast shy away from discussing dark truths about beloved composers and works—Richard Strauss’s early affiliation with the Nazi Party, for example, or racist stereotypes in *Porgy and Bess*—or the difficult interplay of politics and music, for instance Dmitri Shostakovich’s ongoing troubles while composing in the Soviet Union under Stalin’s rule. Simmons thinks her candor and the production team’s fastidiousness (each episode is thoroughly fact-checked) ultimately cinched the suc-



Pianist and public speaker Jade Simmons hosts the “Decomposed” podcast.

cess of “Decomposed”: It appeared on Apple Podcasts’ listing of top music podcasts throughout its six-episode season, as well as *Time*’s 2019 list of “The Best New Podcasts of the Year So Far.” Simmons says, “We wanted something that would bring in new audiences, and even now we see [positive] reviews saying, ‘I don’t even like classical!’ And connoisseurs really appreciated that

they weren’t hearing the same tropes.” Some of the most popular podcasts in the past year have similarly set their concepts apart by focusing on a specific facet

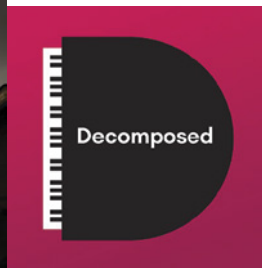
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In addition to his guest-conducting work and serving as music director of Switzerland’s Lausanne Chamber Orchestra, Joshua Weilerstein hosts the repertoire-focused podcast “Sticky Notes.”



interview series “Trilloquy” discusses navigating the classical music industry as a musician of color; and “Aria Code,” produced in partnership with WNYC, WQXR, and the Metropolitan Opera, structures each episode around a single operatic aria.

“Sticky Notes” and “Living Music with Nadia Sirota”

Many podcasts are partnered with or distributed by major radio stations or organizations. However, thanks to the medium’s negligible start-up costs and potential for audience growth, even podcasts lacking institutional support can reach a broad audience. The repertoire-focused “Sticky Notes” remains a one-man operation funded entirely by Patreon sponsors, with host Joshua Weilerstein juggling production alongside his globetrotting conducting career. (Case in point: When he and I spoke on the phone, Weilerstein was cutting an episode on the GarageBand app in a Brussels hotel room.) “My expectation when I started this was to do ten episodes, get a few hundred people to listen, and then be done,” Weilerstein says. “But without a lot of advertising and almost no presence beyond the Facebook page, it’s gotten almost 700,000 downloads. It’s a chance for me to step away from conducting and write, which is something I’ve always wanted to do.”

Though the music Weilerstein conducts often informs the podcast’s programming, “Sticky Notes” is completely independent from the Lausanne Chamber Orchestra, the Swiss ensemble Weilerstein leads as music director. But a number of orchestras and performing arts institutions have launched their own long-running and successful podcasts. Canada’s National Arts Centre Orchestra has produced “NACOCast” and “Explore the Symphony”—recorded in French as “L’univers symphonique”—since 2006 and 2007, respectively, and the Barbican Centre in London produced long-running podcasts about its contemporary and classical music series from 2010 to 2018.

Likely the greatest perk enjoyed by

podcasts made in-house by or in partnership with performing arts institutions is their level of legal protection, should they choose to excerpt that institution's commercial recordings. The fair-use doctrine broadly allows limited reproduction of copyrighted materials for educational or critical commentary, although copyright owners can dispute fair-use interpretations. Because podcast episodes can be downloaded like any other audio file—unlike live radio, which is understood to be more ephemeral—using excerpts from a commercial recording, regardless of length, is a potential liability if podcasters don't obtain the rights to the recording. When cutting music drops for her former podcast, "Meet the Composer," Sirota and her producer, Alex Overington, constantly had to navigate copyright law, given their focus on new compositions not in the public domain. "You can't, for example, put a track from a commercially available album on a podcast, because then you're giving that out for free," Sirota explains.

Her new podcast, "Living Music with Nadia Sirota," eliminates this risk by sourcing audio from live events that combine concert performances with commentary from individuals across "the entire contemporary music ecosystem"—handily creating a revenue stream for the podcast

(CAP) at UCLA, where Sirota serves as artist-in-residence; the podcast's concert series will be held and recorded in CAP's Nimoy Theater when the venue opens in 2020. Until the theater opens, Sirota is taping episodes via ticketed live recording events around the country. Unlike "Meet the Composer," Sirota will remain in full creative control of the podcast and its programming. "We have the flexibility to do what we want. It's more about this being a platform for people to experience new music," she says. " 'Meet the Composer' was awesome;



Kim Nowacki

Nadia Sirota in WQXR's studio working on her "Meet the Composer" podcast, which she hosted from 2015 until 2017. Sirota's new podcast, "Living Music With Nadia Sirota," launches in 2020.

lighter, more passive kind of engagement, but for people who really want to know more, 'Fanfare' is a great platform for that."

By design, "Fanfare" podcasts are pegged

Sean Rice, second clarinet of Canada's National Arts Centre Orchestra, has hosted his orchestra's "NACOcast" podcast since 2016. He interviews the people behind the music in a conversational, casual setting. "I love hearing guests' stories," Rice says.

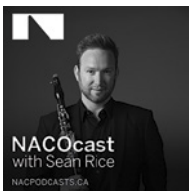
I'm so proud of it. I also did it in a context where I don't own any of my intellectual property from that experience. That's something I'm learning from, and moving forward, I really want to have the creative freedom and ownership of the projects I do."

"Fanfare Cincinnati" and "NACOcast"

Besides potential legal cover, institutionally affiliated podcasts also benefit from a ready-made local audience base. When Chris Pinelo, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra's vice president of communications, started "Fanfare Cincinnati" in 2018, he already knew from conversations with patrons that the behind-the-scenes podcast would appeal to those curious about "how the sausage is made." Says Pinelo, "Any time you're engaging with an organization, there's going to be different ways to engage. Sometimes you're looking for a

to the orchestra's activities—from more general topics like the audition process to organization-specific initiatives, like the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra/Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music Diversity Fellowship—but Pinelo views its aims as less promotional than narrative. For example, a "Fanfare" episode last August about the CSO's world premiere recording of the new critical edition of *An American in Paris* included an interview with Mark Clague, the University of Michigan-based musicologist who revised the work, and discussed the ensemble's own history with the piece. "A lot of times when you're dealing with a billboard, a social media post, or even an ad, your message has to be really pithy, really precise. There was a desire for a platform that could take a deeper dive," Pinelo explains. "This is a way to tell that story in a compelling way, and it gives you enough space and time to not just pay lip service but get into the substance."

Sean Rice, second clarinet of Canada's National Arts Centre Orchestra (NACO), takes a similar approach to his orchestra's



Clarinetist Sean Rice (second from left, front row) with fellow musicians in Canada's National Arts Centre Orchestra. Rice hosts the orchestra's "NACOcast" podcast.

through ticket sales. Additionally, "Living Music" has made a five-year commitment to a "creative development partnership" with the Center for Artistic Performance



Chris Pinelo, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra's vice president of communications, started the CSO's "Fanfare Cincinnati" podcast in 2018, designed to give a behind-the-scenes view of the orchestra.

"NACOCast" podcast, which he has hosted after taking over the podcast from former principal tuba Nick Atkinson in 2016. On "NACOCast," Rice interviews the people behind the music in a conversational, casual setting. "We look at the upcoming guest conductors and soloists, or see if there's interesting programs that we want to put on the radar of our listening audience. But I think my main inspiration is, I love hearing guests' stories," Rice says.

Last spring, Rice recorded his first in-depth podcast installments, which go behind the scenes of an ongoing NAC initiative in Eskasoni, a Mi'kmaw reserve in Nova Scotia. The NAC's project, which includes coachings with student musicians and collaborative performances on

recordings, and performance excerpts, Rice hopes the "NACOCast" episodes offer a way to take listeners deeper into that

the reserve, is in line with the greater Canadian reconciliation movement addressing the government's legacy of human-rights abuses against First Nations peoples, including forcibly separating thousands of Indigenous children from their families. Through interviews, audio


Rice says. "The episode basically covers what we did as musicians to collaborate with artists out there. Those are the kinds of things that we look forward to talking about in the podcast."

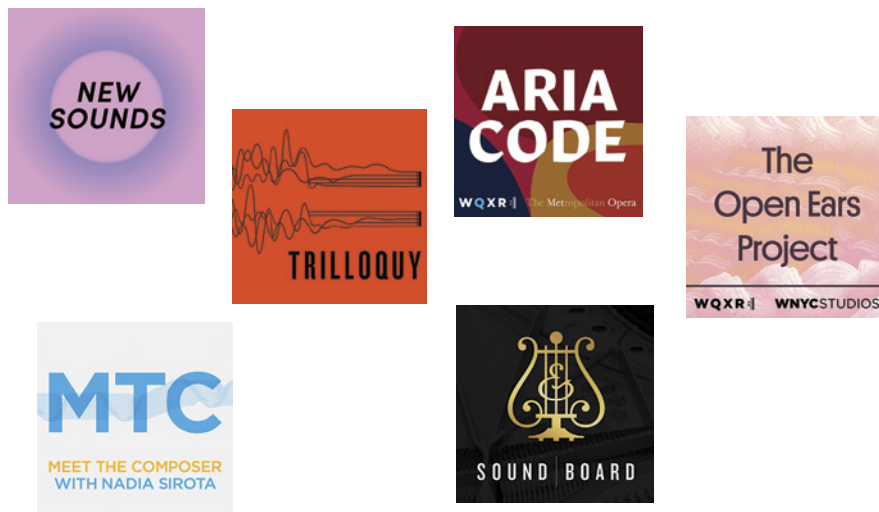
That's one thing classical music podcast hosts interviewed for this article agreed upon across the board: the importance of folding the distance between audiences and the concert stage. Audiences may see soloists or orchestral musicians perform all the time, or hear a composer's works on a program, but listening to musicians' narratives in their own voice can deepen the concertgoing experience and help break down perceptions of the genre as high-falutin or inaccessible. "We have this really interesting liturgy of performance in classical music [that] can also kind of dehumanize it—like 'Oh, there's an orchestra

By design, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra's "Fanfare Cincinnati" podcasts are pegged to the orchestra's activities—from more general topics like the audition process to organization-specific initiatives, like the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra/Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music Diversity Fellowship.

experience, creating a lasting document that can circulate far beyond the project's original audience. "I was one of the people who got to go out there and work with students at one of the high schools, [leading] clarinet and saxophone coachings,"

onstage,' and they might as well be robots," Sirota says. "It's more impressive to me that people get on stage and play something together, and you realize that those are actual human people."

Pinelo couldn't agree more. He says the local success of "Fanfare Cincinnati" taught him how that concept can be scaled locally, strengthening relationships with longtime patrons and offering a window into the orchestral world for the uninitiated but curious. "Sometimes artistic leadership and musicians are put up on a pedestal, but [then] you realize that they go to the same grocery store, or their kids go to the same school," Pinelo says. "If we can build a sense of connectedness with the community, people would be more apt to get engaged with the orchestra. I think this is something other orchestras should think about—ways to engage audience members and demystify what we do." 



Among current and former music podcasts are John Schaefer's "New Sounds," about contemporary music; "Trilloquy," about navigating the classical-music field as a musician of color; "Aria Code," which explores a single opera aria in each episode; WQXR's "Meet the Composer" and "Open Ears Project" podcasts; and Steinway & Sons' "Sound Board," hosted by Ben Finane.

HANNAH EDGAR is a freelance culture writer and *Chicago* magazine's assistant digital editor. Her writing has been published in *The Classical Review*, *New Sounds*, *WFMT.com*, the *Miami Herald*, and *New York Philharmonic* programs.

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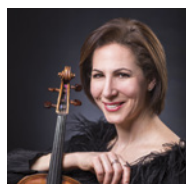
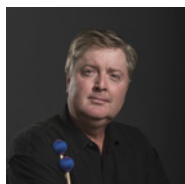
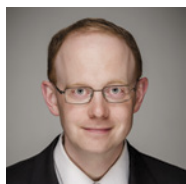
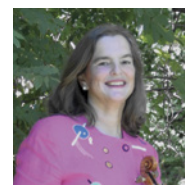
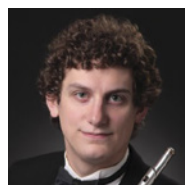
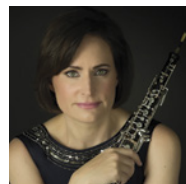
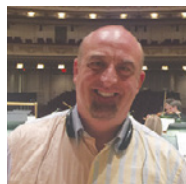


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