

STAYING RELEVANT

“RELEVANT” IS A TRICKY WORD IN THE ORCHESTRA BUSINESS.

BY EDDIE SILVA



David Robertson

DILIP VISHWANATH

“The world is too much with us.” That line by William Wordsworth—written at a time when the Industrial Revolution was rapidly transforming how people lived and thought—always carries relevance. It speaks to personal burdens, to an overwhelmed psyche that cries, however quietly, “enough”—whether the cause be existential despair or too many e-mails.

It also speaks to “the world” that impresses itself on all of us: media, social and otherwise, the chatter and noise of the culture, “news” that briefly infiltrates our consciousness and just as swiftly dissipates, the wild interchange of reality and reality TV, apps and Google Glass, the incessant data stream.

Wordsworth removed himself to the English Lake country to go off-line. For the 21st century “us,” it takes much more.

For all that, “The world is too much with us,” is as relevant to us in the early part of the 21st century as it was to readers of Wordsworth in the early part of the 19th century. It’s relevant, whether you read it in a book or on a Kindle.

Staying Relevant

Around the same time that Wordsworth penned his sonnet, Ludwig van Beethoven was writing his Symphony No. 3, “Eroica.” The St. Louis Symphony performed Beethoven’s revolutionary symphony in January 2014, as part of a month-long festival celebrating the composer.

David Robertson and the St. Louis Symphony performed “Eroica” pretty straight up—no visuals on the screen above the stage, no live Twitter feed during the performance. Its relevance could be found in the dedication and artistry the musicians brought to the music and the response of the audience—a loud and sustained ovation, followed by praise via individual Facebook and Twitter postings.

But Robertson added another element to the mix. In the first half of the program the Symphony performed the music of contemporary Australian composer Brett Dean, with Dean on hand to perform his own Viola Concerto. Beethoven played most of his own piano concertos, so a composer playing his own work was a kind of weekend “Throwback Thursday.”

Also on the program was Dean’s *Testament*, which directly and poignantly reflected on Beethoven’s life, his struggle, his deafness. Dean had made a pilgrimage to Austria to see the actual “Heiligenstadt Testament,” the document Beethoven wrote admitting his deafness, with intimations of suicide. Dean imagined the sound of pen on parchment, a sound Beethoven could barely hear.

Dean’s *Testament* was performed by 12 violists standing in a semi-circle on stage, including the composer. At first they played with unrosined bows. “The audience sees the activity of the violists,” Robertson observed, “but hear almost nothing, and are thus connected to Beethoven’s deafness.” Later in the work the violists took up rosined bows, and played music that contained phrases from the “Razumovsky” Quartets, which Beethoven wrote during his time at Heiligenstadt, the resort he retreated to outside of Vienna. Thus Beethoven’s despair and his triumph were evoked in a few minutes of music.

This performance of Dean and Beethoven occurred early in the 21st century, at a time when a technological revolution is rapidly changing how people live and think. The technology utilized on stage mostly came out of the 18th and 19th centuries. As with any concert at Powell Hall, the audience was asked to turn off all their advanced technological devices and to “enjoy the show.” The concert hall grew still even as sirens occasionally blared from



Karita Mattila

LAURI ERIKSSON

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the world outside. This is all familiar to an orchestral audience—the moment of anticipation before the beautiful music is made. But with *Testament*, Robertson and the musicians broke protocol. Virtuosity became less relevant than the larger performance effect.

A symphony orchestra seeks to establish its relevance in many ways. One of those is through its interactions with its community. Musicians engaged with schools, hospitals, senior centers, churches, synagogues, or playing in parks and community centers prove their relevance through those interactions, their presence, their sense of being a part of their community.

These engagements are arguably even more relevant when these musicians are of the highest quality. It means more to have the best among us.

In popular culture, relevance is often confused with currency, which is determined by visibility in the culture: how much product you sell, how

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many hits and likes you get, how many followers. Are you trending?

In March, David Robertson led the St. Louis Symphony in a performance of Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, featuring the soprano Karita Mattila. Schoenberg is a tough sell. The “emancipator of dissonance,” Schoenberg could be openly dismissive to his contemporary audiences, a disdain that has seeped into our own time.

Yet Schoenberg was seeking an art that was relevant to his time, a world with Freud in it, and, by the time *Erwartung* was first performed, a world violently and catastrophically torn by the First World War. Schoenberg knew he could not write the music of Beethoven in this new world and be relevant, an idea Beethoven understood himself when he wrote in his Symphony No. 9, “Oh Friends, not these sounds!”

Schoenberg's sounds, even after a century has passed, are still not easy to take. Mattila herself commented on this during an interview for St. Louis Public Radio. She spoke of the difficulty of the work, both for the listener and for the artist. But she also spoke of her need to do it, her need to take on the greatest artistic challenges.

Relevance means it matters.

The world is too much with us. Orchestras ask themselves: Do we play the favorites? Play them in synch with Twitter feeds or Google Glass enhancements?

Art is, in part, a matter of weighing relevancies.

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