

# Start Spreading the **News**

At right: How do you get your news? Coverage and reviews by mainstream media are vital for orchestras. But as readers change how they consume media (whether in print or digitally) and publications face drops in advertising, newspapers and magazines are cutting back on arts coverage.

**As traditional media outlets devote less coverage to classical music, orchestras are filling the void by stepping forward to tell their own stories themselves.**

by Susan Elliott





**S**cratch the surface of any symphony orchestra and you'll find a highly complex, sophisticated organism of ever-moving, ever-morphing interdependent parts. All have the same ultimate mission, of course, but how they get there is another story.

In fact, orchestras have a "treasure trove of stories to tell," as Charlie Wade, senior vice president of marketing and business operations at the Seattle Symphony, puts it. But who's going to tell the stories, how, and to whom—especially when music critics and local newspapers are heading for extinction in all but the major markets?

The bottom line is, orchestras increasingly have to tell their own stories, and in their own ways. Ironically, digital media, often perceived as a huge threat to live performance (and film, books, newspapers, and magazines) has become an essential tool for survival. Virtually all arts organizations are now up to speed with mobile-compatible websites and e-newsletters, along with judicious use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and/or sophisticated CMS (Customer Management Systems) software that links their development, public relations, marketing, and ticketing efforts.

"This is the biggest challenge right now," says Adam Crane, vice president of external affairs for the New York Philharmonic, which, like the orchestras in some other big cities, still gets coverage from local mainstream media. "If you want to get your story out, you have to generate your own content. Balance—who controls the

content, where does it live, who creates it" is the issue, says Crane. At the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, where Crane was senior vice president of external affairs and strategic initiatives, social media and "content marketing," as it is called, lived in the marketing department. At the Philharmonic, it "lives" in external affairs, which communicates regularly with marketing. "We all have the same goal, it's just a question of how do you get there," says Crane. "You have to pull back and ask the questions, 'What do we stand for? What story are we telling? Are we relevant?'"

**Newspapers, magazines, and professional music critics are facing cutbacks. Orchestras increasingly have to tell their own stories, and in their own ways.**

Professional outlets that carry informed coverage of the arts are few and far between these days, so orchestras are filling the void to get their messages out. The impartial, journalistic perspective may be missing, but the information—lacking a middleman—is accurate.

#### **Who's Doing What**

A highly unscientific survey of U.S. orchestra websites and their distribution channels shows a vast variety of approaches, both to creating content and distributing it. A website can offer a straight-up

sales option ("click here, buy a ticket") or a more subtle one ("watch this guest-artist video interview, buy a ticket to see him/her in the flesh") or pure story telling ("we performed in a senior center last week, and here is some video and photography from the event") or all of the above. There may be an essay by a local freelancer on as broad a topic as American music, or one by a university scholar on Mahler, as the orchestra prepares for an upcoming cycle of his symphonies.

And while all distribution outlets—from Instagram to monthly e-newsletters—may lead to the website, the goal is broader than just ticket sales. "It's much longer-term than that," says Gwen Pappas, director of communications for the Minnesota Orchestra. "It's about building relationships. Someone might buy a ticket, or give a gift, or just care more about the organization because they feel more connected." Pappas reports that a new software system, implemented within the last two years, has enabled the orchestra's marketing, fundraising, and communications departments to "speak to each other. Now, we're in an environment where we can look holistically at orchestra fans, be they audiences, donors, or both, and really chart out a deliberate strategy of communication."

Pappas runs a weekly Communications Council meeting. "We get together every Monday, with representatives from marketing, communications, development, artistic, and education," she explains. "We go through a weekly checklist: 'What are we putting out on social [media] this

**“If you want to get your story out, you have to generate your own content,” says Adam Crane, vice president of external affairs for the New York Philharmonic.**

week; what press releases, marketing materials; any program changes?” Pappas and her team create a weekly email with a mix of stories and videos, some promoting concerts, some about fundraising, some general institutional or classical music topics. A tab at the top of the orchestra’s website marked “stories” leads a reader to scroll through a host of photo-heavy articles and interviews, mostly Q&As, with titles like “Meet a Musician” (Principal Timpani Erich Rieppel) or “Meet the Composer” (Missy Mazzoli), with options at the end of each to buy a ticket to their upcoming concert. There’s also an article on American mu-

sic by Peter Mercer-Taylor, a professor of musicology at the University of Minnesota, with no “call to action” at the end, and another on the upcoming Symphony Ball. Most of the content is generated by the four-member communications office, says Pappas, although freelancers or scholars like Mercer-Taylor are also hired occasionally. The orchestra has a videographer on staff, whose work is largely used on its social media channels. A few other orchestras have created similar staff positions.

“Social media is a hungry beast,” says Pappas, “and we’ve got to keep feeding it” with new content all the time. Like most organizations, Minnesota recycles much of its content—including concert program-book articles—on its various digital outlets.



Left to right: New York Philharmonic Vice President of External Affairs Adam Crane, President and CEO Deborah Borda, and actor-director Bradley Cooper share a moment while Cooper researches an upcoming biopic about Leonard Bernstein, the Philharmonic’s former music director.

### Filling the Gap

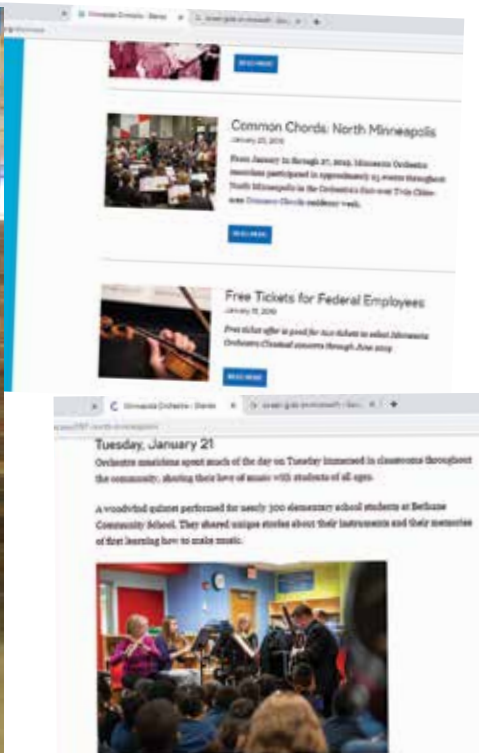
With some newspapers running only a few articles a month to cover the city’s entire arts scene, the Seattle Symphony’s response has been to “create our own newsroom,” reports Rosalie Contreras, the orchestra’s vice president of communications. “Sometimes other departments come and pitch us their projects, just like we used to do with the newspaper. So we develop an editorial calendar that works for everyone and keeps the organization’s goals front and center.” Content distribution, like all outlets canvassed for this article, ranges from weekly and/or monthly e-newsletters to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram posts, and most of the content lives on the orchestra’s website as well. Seattle even profiles some of its patrons in short “Here to Hear” articles in the concert program book.

The orchestra also makes good use of its local NPR outlet, KING FM, with a combination of concert broadcasts and weekly interviews with guest artists. It has its own streaming channel via KING FM. Multiple orchestras stream concerts or one-off events; smaller-budget orchestras can afford to stream a concert through apps like FacebookLive, which is free. And the cost of a YouTube channel—free—makes it a go-to outlet for orchestras of any size.

If Minnesota and Seattle mostly divide up content creation among staff in their respective communications/PR departments, the Utah Symphony | Opera about two years ago hired a specific “digital con-



Above: Minnesota Orchestra staff in front of the Nelson Mandela stained-glass window at Regina Mundi Church in Johannesburg, South Africa, during the orchestra’s 2018 tour. From left, Kari Marshall, director of artistic planning; Beth Kellar-Long, vice president of orchestra administration; Kris Arkis, orchestra personnel manager; Kevin Smith, then-president and CEO; Mele Willis, artistic operations manager; Gwen Pappas, director of communications, and, in front, Michael Pelton, artistic planning manager and executive assistant. Right top and bottom: The orchestra’s weekly email includes stories and videos, and a section of the website features articles and interviews, most of them generated by staff.



tent producer,” whose sole job is to write articles, shoot photos and video, and write and respond to social media posts. Kathleen Sykes, whose background is advertising (not music, or any of the arts) came onboard about eighteen months ago, when *The Salt Lake Tribune* scaled back arts coverage. (The other Salt Lake paper, *Deseret News*, had also made cuts in arts reporting.)



In response to scaled-back arts coverage at local media outlets, the Utah Symphony | Opera hired Kathleen Sykes as digital content producer.

“I remember the good old days, when we would get a preview and/or a review in the newspaper,” says Jonathan Miles, vice president of marketing and public relations, in the job twelve years. “But those days are long gone. I hired Kathleen because we needed someone internal to tell our story and help communicate with audiences. She covers all the orchestra concerts and opera dress rehearsals; she’ll interview a guest artist ahead of time.” Utah Symphony | Opera Facebook followers, by Sykes’s calculations, have increased by about a third (to 30,000) since her arrival. “I feel like I can write in a way that our patrons would love,” she says. “I can be funny or funky and have a sense of humor.”

Miles points out that occasionally he’ll turn one of the social media channels over to a guest artist. “They can tell their story for a day on Instagram,” he explains, “so they get access to the account and talk directly to the audience.”

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra created its own “newsroom” a few years back

when it launched the *CSO Sounds and Stories* section of its website. Content ranges from photo galleries to question-and-answer interviews with guest artists to unsigned previews of upcoming concerts to in-depth musicological examinations of repertoire. Writers for the bylined articles include scholars, CSO musicians, and veteran music journalists—sometimes the ones whose jobs were eliminated as newspapers and magazines cut back on arts coverage. The site represents significant investment on the part of the CSO, as it aims to strike a balance between promoting upcoming concerts, informing first-timers, and engaging classical-music enthusiasts who want to know more.

### Did the Tree Fall in the Forest?

If orchestras are building closer relationships with their audiences, a big additional challenge remains: finding new and alternative audiences. And that is where the lack of mainstream media remains a stubborn issue.

“We still need traditional media,” says Contreras, “because it puts us in front of people we wouldn’t otherwise reach.”

“The challenge is the reach,” concurs Miles. “We’re talking to the same people” without the wider reach of mainstream media.

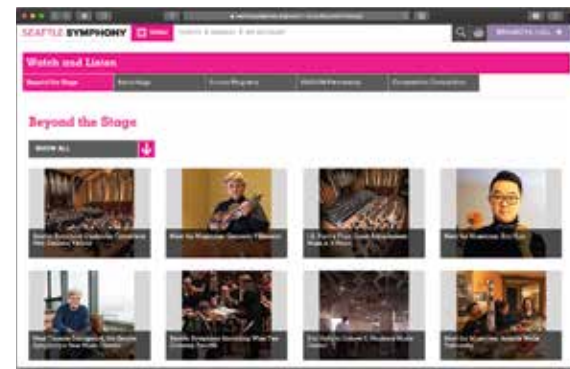
Even the newspapers that continue to cover classical music do so on a very limited basis. At *The New York Times*, if there’s not a new production at the Metropolitan Opera, a world premiere in Carnegie Hall or David Geffen Hall, or an off-the-wall, cutting-edge, trans-sexual indie band in

the bowels of Brooklyn, coverage is scarce and, at that, often focused more on human interest than music-making. Publishers like to see readers click on stories; insufficient numbers of clicks means insufficient readership, which means less and often no coverage.

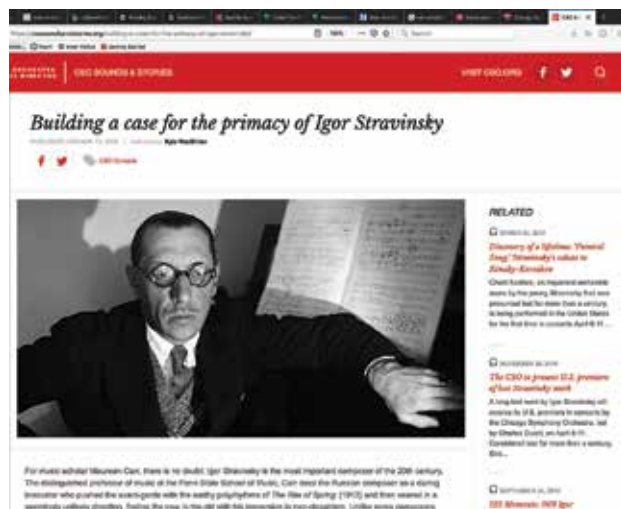
[Editor’s Note: To keep classical-music journalism going, a few nonprofits are stepping in. In 2017, the San Francisco-based Rubin Institute for Music Criti-



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The Seattle Symphony responded to diminished arts coverage by creating its own digital newsroom, says Vice President of Communications Rosalie Contreras, at center in photo. In photo, from left: Managing Editor Heidi Staub; Social Media and Content Manager Andrew Stiefel; Contreras; Digital Content Manager James Holt; and Public Relations Manager Shiva Shafii. Below: The Beyond the Stage section of the Seattle Symphony’s site features articles, interviews, and video.



Articles at the extensive CSO Sounds and Stories section of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s website include profiles of CSO musicians, interviews with guest artists, previews of coming concerts, and essays by journalists and musicologists.

cism began granting money to newspapers that were reducing or eliminating classical music coverage; essentially, Rubin underwrites about 85 percent of a freelance classical music writer’s position. Newspapers in Boston, Dallas, Houston, Pittsburgh, Toronto, and elsewhere have kept classical-music journalists on staff with this



Robert Cummerow



Robert Cummerow

The Toledo Symphony, responding to less local arts coverage, posts videos by staff members including Artistic Administrator and Principal Second Violin Merwin Siu (top photo). Above, left to right, Toledo Symphony President and CEO Zak Vassar, Director of Marketing Felecia Kanney, Siu, and Music Director Alain Trudel.

support. A couple of nonprofits are taking a more localized approach by supporting arts coverage at their hometown news outlets. Whether such efforts will last depends on the support of the nonprofits.]

At the Toledo Symphony, where the lo-

cal *Blade* newspaper is quietly phasing out its print operations, Director of Marketing Felecia Kanney says that when the paper does send a critic—only to cover programs being performed more than once, of course—“It really helps sales. In fact, it’s critical to what we do.” *The Blade*, like other newspapers, is beefing up its online presence, to the point of cutting printed editions entirely a few days a week.

Lacking the local coverage, Kanney uploads short videos by Toledo Symphony President and CEO Zak Vassar and by Artistic Administrator and Principal Second Violin Merwin Siu on the orchestra’s website. Recently Vassar talked about an upcoming program featuring Brahms’s First Symphony and how it connected with other works on the bill by Clara (“Brahms’s muse”) and Robert (her husband) Schumann.

Phoenix Symphony uses short videos on its website as well, although they tend to be more generic about the symphonic experience than interview-focused. The lack of local media coverage there has prompted Chief Marketing Officer Todd Vigil to move his entire advertising budget to digital, especially for single-ticket sales. Print advertising, he declares, is dead. “As an industry we have this love affair with print that really is a one-sided relationship; we’re giving them a lot and really getting nothing in return,” especially as “in return” relates not only to editorial coverage, but also to print’s effectiveness as a sales tool.



National Sawdust, the Brooklyn-based music presenter, created its own online publication, *LOG*, which covers not only Sawdust performers such as the Kronos Quartet but also features reviews, essays, and interviews about other music organizations. National Sawdust’s director of publications is veteran newspaper arts reporter and editor Steve Smith.

“We were spending a quarter of a million on ads with the local paper [*The Arizona Republic*] and cut all that over the last six or seven years, along with TV and radio and most of our direct mail,” says Vigil, who is 39. “Print ads are not effective; not sharable; they’re boring. I don’t question that older people read the newspaper but I also know that they’re spending up to six hours a day on Facebook. I go to Einstein’s Bagels every morning and there’s a group of older folks sitting there and they all read the paper and I’ve never once seen them show their neighbor an ad and be like, ‘Hey, look what’s going on at the symphony this weekend.’ Whereas on Facebook they can do that.”

Which is why he limits single-ticket ad-



Alexandra Llamas



Patti Photography

Phoenix Symphony Chief Marketing Officer Todd Vigil (at right) limits the orchestra’s single-ticket advertising to Facebook and Google. Above, Vigil gives a talk on the Phoenix Symphony’s digital evolution at Capacity Interactive’s 2017 Digital Marketing Boot Camp for the Arts in New York City.

**The lack of local media coverage prompted Todd Vigil, chief marketing officer at the Phoenix Symphony, to move his advertising budget to digital. “We’ve just gone to where people’s eyeballs are—their phones and their desktops,” he says.**

vertising to Facebook and Google. “We’ve just gone to where people’s eyeballs are—their phones and their desktops,” says Vigil. And it’s working. He reports that the marketing budget has remained flat

**BMOP**  
Our exclusive interview with Steven Mackey

"I want my music to be human and connected to the core motivations of music – to sing, to dance and to have transcendent experience."

Like Hannah Lash, with whom he shares our October 19 program, Steven Mackey is both a composer and a solo performer. He has written a wide array of works for himself to perform on electric guitar with various collaborators, chamber ensembles, and orchestras, including his 2015 opera *Opheus* (Living), and the theater piece *Slide*.

**BMOP**  
A conversation with John Corigliano

"When I was writing my early pieces, I did it in a hyper way because for me, composing was such a nerve-racking thing to do. Now, the whole note is my friend; an adagio is what I look for."

I had the chance to chat with composer John Corigliano before he left New York for a vacation to warmer climates. We talked about the two pieces on our Saturday, February 23, 2019 program at 8pm in Jordan Hall, and how he always looks forward to working with new music ensembles such as BMOP.

"They figure out new music quickly because they see it as vital and important...plus they are familiar with the vocabulary and notation."

The centerpiece of our performance is *Troubadours*, John's guitar concerto, with soloist Elliot Diskin. We talked about his approach to concerto writing, working with soloists, and the process of creating *Troubadours*.

On his works for soloist and orchestra,

The Boston Modern Orchestra Project's marketing emails include interviews with featured composers, including Steven Mackey in October and John Corigliano in February.

but attendance and revenue have increased significantly. “Since 2011, our earned revenue is up 65 percent; single tickets are up 145 percent; subscriptions grew 2 percent, which is why I like to joke that flat is the new up.” (Vigil’s background is in sales, most recently at Target department stores.)

Of course, what works in Phoenix, Arizona, may not work in Salt Lake City,

Utah, and what works in New York, New York, most likely will not work in Springfield, Illinois.

Every market is different, not to mention every orchestra. As Crane puts it, “There are no easy answers. Everyone is trying to stand out.”

SUSAN ELLIOTT is the news and special reports editor of *Musical America*.

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