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by David Giovannoni

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CLASSICAL PROGRAMMING'S PREDICTABLE FUTURE

Digital Delivery Systems Will Force Format Focusing Further & Faster

by David Giovannoni

Switch on summer from a slot machine.
You can have everything you want.
You can have everything.
—Stephen Demetri Georgiou (Cat Stevens)

Music personnel take note. The technology that will replace radio as we now know it – and classical music programming as we now do it – is here today.

Two months ago this technology was installed in my home and office. In the eight weeks that I've been listening to the future, I haven't once tuned to music on radio. The music services delivered by this new technology have totally displaced my at-work and at-home radio music listening.

I've been listening to DMX (Digital Music Express_) – a music service beamed by satellite to cable systems across the country. DMX delivers 30 music channels digitally. It sounds exactly as if the music were playing from a compact disc. Each channel is a different genre of music (see listing) and is available 24 hours a day. For about $10 per month it triples the number of programmed music sources available to me. It's like living in three radio markets at once.

The most wonderful thing about this service is the talk. There isn't any. No DJs or hosts; no front or back announces; no station IDs or PSAs; no commercials; no membership drives. Nobody interrupts the flow of the music to tell you that there are no interruptions.

Want to know what you're hearing? The handheld remote is called the "DMX DJ" for a reason. Mash its VIEW button and the title of the piece, the composer, performer, and other information appear in its liquid crystal display. It even identifies the CD by number, making it easy to order. (A CD purchasing service isn't offered by DMX, but it seems a natural tie-in.) And while you're reading all of this information, the music keeps on playing.

I am not endorsing DMX. It just happens to be the service offered by the local cable system. Nor am I claiming that DMX or other cable audio services will eliminate FM radio. They won't. But their non-tethered cousins will.

Within a few years digital signals similar to these will be sent through the air from terrestrial stations. These will be local services, just like FM stations are today. (Most music directors will be programming some sort of local, digitally-delivered service by the end of the decade.) Regionally and nationally, digital signals will be beamed directly to homes, cars, offices, and perhaps even Walkmans from satellites. And you can bet they'll be riding on the "information highway" that the new presidential administration is talking about.

Even though it's technically limited and programmatically flawed (more on this later), DMX and services like it show us the technology that will do to today's radio what CDs have done to LPs. The technology may be new, but the concepts that shape its programming and force us to change ours are not new. We've been talking about them in this column for six years now.

For instance, these new technologies open up whole new types of competition. By making available more audio services to the listener, they continue radio's powerful trend toward smaller audience shares, sharper programming focus, and more narrowly-defined niches. Indeed, they will compel *broadcasters* to evolve into *narrowcasters*.

Another example. It's not the fact that their signals are *digital* that make these technologies so significant. What's important is that digital signals are *addressable*. An addressable signal is one that can be received by some persons and not by others.

Today's radio signals are not addressable; they can be heard by anyone with a radio. DMX and other services delivered by cable are addressable. When the installer completed his installation of my DMX receiver, he called the cable company, read a number printed on the receiver, and the head end sent a code into the cable that activated the box. This can be done over the air just as easily as over a cable. There are many ways to achieve addressability but they all have the same end: to allow the signal to be heard by some and to keep it away from others.

Addressability can have profound effects on programming. It can remove funding messages from the programming stream, for instance. Commercial radio is paid for by commercial messages in its programming; public stations are increasingly supported by funding messages, whether they be underwriting credits or inducements to members.

Addressability makes it possible to bill people for their use of the service – or at least, for their ability to receive the service. Clearly, this will change the entire nature of public radio's membership and development functions. The way we program must change, too.

Any audio service thus transformed from a free commodity into a user-supported utility will survive only when its programming is significant to significant numbers of users. This requires both a *depth* and a *breadth* to the service.

DMX, for instance, achieves breadth by offering a wide variety of services. Yes, it offers 30 channels; but after the initial novelty wears off, most subscribers settle down into regular use of just a few channels per week. Maybe even just one or two. Push buttons on the DMX unit allow instant access to favorite stations – just like on a car radio.

Given the breadth across services, each service can offer a depth, focus, and consistency currently unmatched by over-the-air media. Focused: one type of music, no talk. Consistent: 24 hours each day, seven days each week. Deep: narrowcasting means deep cuts are heard.

Does this sound familiar? Diversity is achieved by multiple services, each focused upon a consistent format or appeal. Consistency within each format encourages use. Sharply focused formats and appeals serve some listeners extremely well, others not at all. Sufficient format variety across the service attracts a paying audience large enough to support the service as a whole. Some people will choose not to listen and therefore not to pay. When people do pay for the service, it is because they use it, value it, and consider it an important part of their lives.

These are central themes of AUDIENCE 88, the *Report of the Expansion Task Force*, and the *PUBLIC RADIO PROGRAMMING STRATEGIES* report. These ideas aren't simply notions-of-the-day in public radio: they are central to the past history, present operation, and future direction of all mass media.

And they apply just as much to information programming as to music. As a subscriber, I'd be delighted if DMX expanded its service to include CNN audio on channel 31, Monitor Radio's 24-hour international service on channel 32, and direct feeds of NPR news programs on channel 33. Station owners and operators will fight such distribution; but frankly, in this evolving environment the notion of "station" is being displaced by that of "program source." Research shows it's already begun in the minds of public radio listeners.

What type of person will pay for a service that traditionally has been free? For starters, how about all of those people you've trained to respond to your appeals for support. They're called "public radio members."

DMX Today

New technologies such as DMX promise "pure" audio formats. Through their ability to deliver multiple, superior-sounding, uninterrupted classical and jazz programming streams, digital delivery systems jeopardize public radio's ownership of its own music audience. They indicate the nature of emerging competition for this audience, and we'd do well to keep an ear on them.

I've been doing just that for several weeks. My informal research is focused on the three classical music channels. It yields both good news and bad news for public radio's music programmers.

The good news is that DMX's classical music channels are poorly programmed. They are organized by genre: Symphonic, Chamber Music, and Opera. That's a good start. One might assume that all vocal music would be entrusted to the Opera channel, but it's heard in all three channels. One might assume that each channel would be programmed modally – that is, it would have a consistent "sound" appealing to a certain type of listener. But not so.

The Modal Music portion of the Denver Project identified a half-dozen classical music modes – each sounding different, each appealing to a certain type of person, each transcending genre or period of composition. My assumptions of what DMX's classical channels would be were shaped by this research. I imagined the Symphonic channel would offer heavier orchestrations, primarily Classical and Romantic works appealing to a 55-plus audience. I assumed the Chamber Music channel would have lighter, brighter, primarily up-tempo Baroque and Classical works appealing to a 40-plus audience. Were it but true. One look at the selections (see Channel Checks) tells you the programmer is slave to the genre, or is at least unresponsive to the modal sensibilities of the listener.

For public broadcasters, that's the good news. The bad news is, it sounds just like most public radio stations. There is one significant difference, though: DMX offers three classical choices instead of just one, and there's never any talk to interrupt the music.

Which would your listeners choose?

David Giovannoni heads Audience Research Analysis, an independent firm specializing in radio audience research. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting funded this report. Opinions expressed are the author's and do not necessarily reflect opinions or policies of the corporation.

The 30 DMX Channels

CLASSICAL
- 1 Symphonic
- 2 Chamber Music
- 3 Opera

JAZZ
- 4 Lite Jazz
- 5 Classic Jazz
- 6 Big Band/Swing

OLDIES
- 7 Classic Rock
- 8 50's Oldies
- 9 60's Oldies
- 10 Folk Rock

COUNTRY
- 11 Modern Country
- 12 Traditional Country

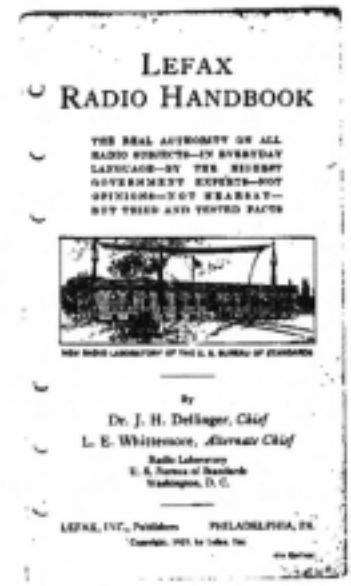
LATIN
- 13 Latin Ballads
- 14 Latin Rhythms

URBAN
- 15 Soul Ballads
- 16 Blues
- 17 Dance
- 18 Reggae
- 19 Rap

EASY LISTENING
- 20 Love Songs
- 21 Great Singers
- 22 Instrumentals
- 23 New Age

ROCK
- 24 Hottest Hits
- 25 Album Rock
- 26 Heavy Metal
- 27 Alternative Rock

AND MORE
- 28 Show Tunes
- 29 World Beat
- 30 Christian



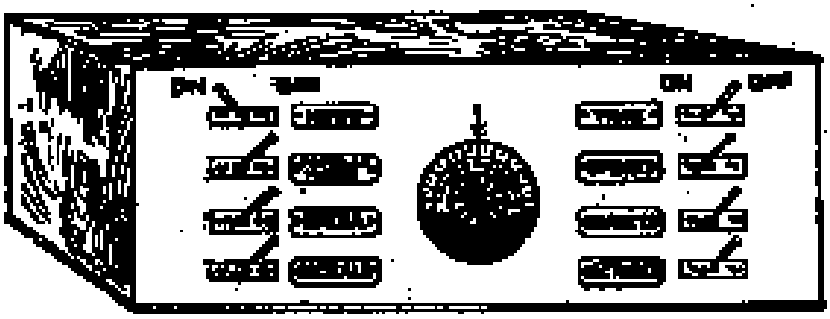


Fig. 2—Radio Broadcast Receiving Set of the Near Future.

Featured in the 1923 edition of the *Lefax Radio Handbook*, this "Radio Broadcast Receiving Set of the Near Future" predicted radio's move to formats and narrowcasting. Written by the "Chief" and "Alternate Chief" of the U. S. Bureau of Standards' Radio Laboratory, the *Lefax Radio Handbook* was subtitled "The Real Authority On All Radio Subjects – In Everyday Language – By The Highest Government Experts – Not Opinions – Not Hearsay – But Tried And Tested Facts." (A standard to which this column aspires.)

Channel Checks

Symphonic Channel

Shostakovich *From Jewish Folk Poetry, Op. 79*
Liszt *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 3*
Prokofiev *The Dance of Steel, Op. 41*
Bartok *Concerto for Orchestra, SZ. 116*
Berg *Three Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 6*
Mahler *Symphony No. 8*
Handel *Concerto For Two Choruses, No. 3*
Strauss *Burning Love Polka-Mazurka*
Mozart *Symphony No. 35*
Stravinsky *The Nightengale's Song*
Bruckner *Symphony No. 4*
Beethoven *Symphony No. 7*
Salieri *Concerto in C*
Borodin *Dance of the Polovtsian Maidens*
Mozart *Piano Concerto No. 9*

Opera Channel

Richard Wagner *Tannhauser, Act 2*
Purcell *Dido and Aeneas, Act 3*
Puccini *Gianni Schicchi, Complete*
Verdi *Falstaff, Act 3*
Boito *Mephistopheles, Act 1*
Gilbert & Sullivan *The Yeomen of the Guard, Act 1*
Giuseppe Verde *Aida, Act 3*
Donizetti *Lucrezia Borgia, Act 1 Part 2*
Richard Strauss *Salome, Part 1*

Chamber Music Channel

Schubert *Impromptu in E Flat Major*
Franck *Quintet in F Minor*
Vivaldi *Concerto in E Flat, RV. 253*
Mendelssohn *Trio in D Minor, Op. 49*
Shostakovich *Quartet No. 14 in F Sharp Major*
Schumann *Symphonic Etudes, Op. 13*
Bach *Toccata, Adagio, & Fugue in C Major*
Britten *Sonata For Cello And Piano, Op. 6*
Mozart *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, K. 525*
Franck *Quintet in F Minor*
Chopin *Scherzo No. 2 in B Minor, Op. 31*
Faure *Romance in B Flat Major, Op. 2*
Handel *Arrival of the Queen of Sheba*
Beethoven *Sonata No. 13, Op. 27, No. 1*
Handel *Suite in E Minor, HWV 438*
Schubert *Hungarian Melody*
Bartok *Contrasts*
Beethoven *Piano Sonata No. 23 in F Minor*
Chopin *Scherzo No. 1 in B Minor, Op. 20*