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New Overtures at the Symphony

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YOU do not have to know anything about classical music, a St. Louis Symphony-linked Web site says. You do not have to dress up "like a fancy-pants." Then there is this ringing recommendation for a musical experience: "Yes, it will be possible to get your Brahms on and enjoy yourself at the same time."

The appeal is for the Seven 18 Club, a concert series meant to lure young professionals with preconcert drinks and postconcert socializing with young orchestra members - one of whom doubles as a sultry model on promotional materials.

It is enough to make traditional music lovers cringe. Which, in fact, is part of the idea.

As audiences seem to grow older and the public turns its attention away from concertgoing, orchestras around the country are adopting a wide array of methods, from the trivial to the thoughtful, to bring more people into the concert hall. They are hunting for the neophytes, the dabblers and mainly the ungray.

This fall, a slate of innovations will be on display for the first time:

- At the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra's "Classical Connections" series for the under-40 set, you can speed date, take salsa lessons or exchange résumés before the performance, a shortened concert with onstage commentary and occasional video.
- For six Friday nights, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra will play a traditional program for the first half of the evening, but then provide the choice of chamber music or jazz in the lobby for the second half.
- The New World Symphony, a high-level training orchestra in Miami Beach led by Michael Tilson Thomas, will play four 20-minute concerts in one evening, each on the hour, from 7 to 10.
- Under-30's attending a Spokane Symphony Beethoven concert will receive free "Beethoven Bash" T-shirts.
- The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's "Beyond the Score" series offers a "live documentary" on a major piece - film clips, an actor reading letters, comments from the conductor and musical examples from the orchestra - followed by a performance of the piece in the second half of the program.
- Peter Schickele, of P. D. Q. Bach infamy, will be the host of three short, early-starting concerts of old war horses at the otherwise reliably staid New York Philharmonic.

Trying nonmusical methods to lure concertgoers is not new. For at least a decade, orchestras - particularly smaller ones - have introduced shorter and earlier concerts, onstage commentary and film-score programs to broaden their appeal. More recent innovations include video screens in the concert hall, hand-held electronic devices to provide running commentary and musical programs built around pop culture themes.

But a recent surge in experimentation tempts one to wonder if orchestra executives and their increasingly influential marketing departments might be panicking. In any case, the ferment of ideas just may change the symphony concert experience.

"I'd like to believe that a great performance of a great work is enough," said Simon Woods, who until last season was president of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra and is now chief executive of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. "We want to cling onto the essential greatness of the music we play, and we sort of hope that will communicate. It's terribly disappointing when it doesn't.

"The reality now is that we are under a lot of pressure to try new things and look at things in a new light. I think that the classical music field has been a little complacent. We've said, 'We get it, so you should get it.' Now we should say, 'We get it, so how can we help you get it?'"

Mr. Woods added, "What I don't think has been figured out is what works and what doesn't work."

Everyone agrees, on the other hand, what inspired this surge of experimentation. The facts are stark, the arguments well rehearsed.

Few major orchestras can fill their halls night after night. Over the decade that started with the 1993-94 season, according to the American Symphony Orchestra League, total attendance at 1,200 orchestras dropped from 30.7 million to 27.7 million, while the number of concerts rose from 27,000 to 37,000. Most major orchestras are earning less and spending more.

Crucially, subscriptions - a critical part of orchestra finances - are declining. And every subscription not renewed is yet one more batch of tickets that must be sold just to stay even. Single-ticket sales usually do not make up the difference.

Why are audiences shrinking? It's the great debate in the classical-music world, as pervasive a topic as race in South Africa or real estate in New York: Is the business of classical music as we know it dying?

Pessimists say it is at least on the decline, and blame a lack of music education, shorter attention spans, an image-obsessed culture and a vast new world of entertainment options. Another point of view says classical music is alive and well, with more listening than ever occurring at home or in the car. Maybe, this line of thought goes, the problem is not demand but supply: too many orchestras are playing too many concerts.

"It used to be orchestras had very small staffs and gave many fewer concerts," said Joseph Horowitz, the author of the recent book "Classical Music

in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall." "This is the nub of the issue. It's a surfeit of product that's causing many of the dysfunctions." That, he says, and the lack of charismatic music directors, amid an overabundance of marketing directors. (Most orchestras did not even have marketing departments until the 1970's. Today, a staff of a dozen is typical.) And there are always practical considerations like concertgoers in suburbs spreading ever farther from downtown concert halls, difficult parking and expensive tickets.

But if orchestras have simply lost touch with the public, others argue, then change is healthy. A 10-year, \$12 million research and financing project by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, called the Magic of Music initiative, found that in the 15 cities studied, only 2 percent to 4 percent of adults regularly attended their orchestras' concerts. Yet the potential market nationwide was estimated at about 27 percent.

Researchers divided that quadrant into categories like active and casual audiences; "sophisticated low-frequency alums," many of whom would attend if invited; dabblers; and "uninitiated prospects." They spoke of orchestras as "delivery systems" for "product," providing an "entertainment experience." Focus on what the audience wants, the study said. Loosen the definition of classical music. Pay more attention to social functions. And offer lots of visual stimulation.

"It's been one-size-fits-all for a long time," said Alan S. Brown, a consultant and the project director of the Knight audience study. "Today's cultural consumers are demanding more intense experiences."

And orchestras are cooking them up and dishing them out. The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, a leader in what might be called the fun-factor area, has a Thursday night series that provides free dinners. The doors to Music Hall open at 6:15, and concertgoers hit the buffet line, taking an entree and salad and sitting at tables in the hall's 20,000-square-foot ballroom. "College Nite" concerts feature postperformance parties twice a year, in which students nibble appetizers and listen to a local band (not the symphonic kind).

Paavo Jarvi, the music director, and orchestra musicians make appearances. The orchestra's CSO Encore! group, for young professionals, is sponsoring a "Dressed to the Nines" party at the hall for opening night, when a Beethoven symphony - no need to say which - is on the program. At the beginning of last season, the symphony even sold "Paavo's Baack" T-shirts, a surprising accessory to Mr. Jarvi's intelligent music-making and serious demeanor.

"We're just trying to snap it up a bit," said the orchestra's spokeswoman, Carrie Krysanick.

The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra is shaking things up too - shaking, but not stirring - with Symphony With a Twist, a series of four concerts preceded by martini bars and jazz in the lobby. The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's version is called Bravo.

IN Houston the focus is less on the party in the lobby than the visuals on the stage. The Houston Symphony projects images of the musicians, arms sawing and fingers flying, and the conductor, baton a-waving, on large screens in the hall. (The Omaha Symphony, the San Diego Symphony and the Philadelphia Orchestra have all tried similar experiments, as did the New York Philharmonic.) "We have to recognize that this is a visual generation," Evans Mirageas, an orchestra marketing consultant, said. "They are used to seeing things more than they are used to hearing things."

Many who are hearing classical music are doing so as a secondary effect of seeing things - like movies and video games. Some orchestras are trying to build on that, enticing people into concert halls by playing a symphonic version of the score to "The Lord of the Rings" and the music from the "Final Fantasy" video game, among others. Traditional film-score concerts, like the Chicago Symphony's "Friday Night at the Movies," are becoming staples. And why just play Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" when you can project artworks along with it, as one orchestra did? Or accessorize Holst's "Planets" with astronomical images, as another did? For that matter, why play individual pieces when you can string them together into catchy themes like "In the Name of Love" or "The Seven Deadly Sins," as the Duluth Superior Symphony Orchestra has done.

But as popular as these attention-grabbing maneuvers have become, not all orchestra executives are signing on. "The gimmicks don't work," said Mark Volpe, the managing director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. "I don't think an orchestra can really be a dating service." Yet he acknowledged that even the Boston Symphony - possessed of one of the most passionate followings in the country, and bolstered by revenues from Tanglewood and the Boston Pops - must work to build audience.

Mr. Volpe pointed to the orchestra's "online conservatory" about works on some programs; program essays by its music director, James Levine; and displays of archival material at Symphony Hall. "People want to be informed," he said. "We're trying to do it in a way that isn't condescending, but at the same time is substantive."

Mr. Woods, of the Royal Scottish orchestra, cited the success museums have had with audio guides, explanatory placards and thematic tours. "You see the symphony orchestra business struggling to find its equivalent of that very creative thing the museum world has gone through," said Mr. Woods, a champion of the orchestra's curatorial role. "We're all looking for the Holy Grail."

The critical question is whether the new tricks actually work. And so far, the evidence is mixed. Cincinnati's free meals brought higher attendance. ("If you feed them, they will come," said Ms. Krysanick, the orchestra's spokeswoman.)

And the Knight study said that thematic and crossover programming brought in more first-timers to the Brooklyn and Fort Wayne philharmonics. But it was unclear whether such concerts would lead to more regular subscriptions. And according to the study, education - like more Web material, preconcert lectures and expanded program notes - did not appear to increase ticket sales at all.

"We live or die on the repertoire, from Bach through John Adams and Steve Reich and so on," said Peter Pastreich, an orchestra administrator for 40 years who retired as executive director of the San Francisco Symphony in 1999. "That's what makes the difference."

As for cocktails and canapés? Can they determine the future of classical music? "We are in a lot of trouble," he said, "if that's true."