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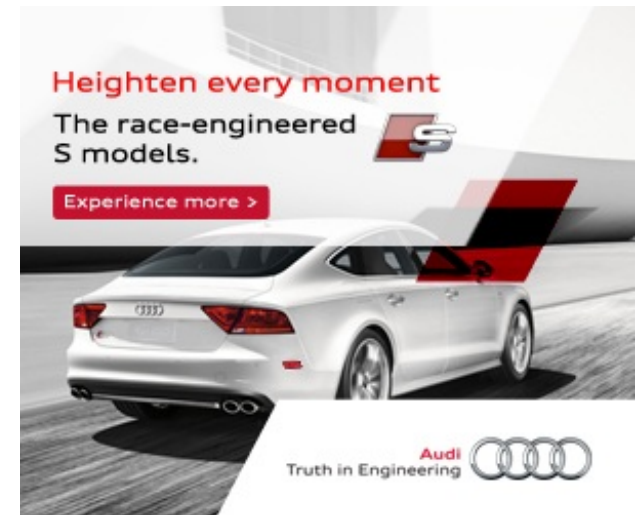
Orchestras, opera companies flirt with new media, but does it matter?

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By Roland Flamini - Special to The Washington Times

Thursday, June 21, 2012



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Banks do it; schools do it; [Mitt Romney](#) and [Barack Obama](#) do it; so why not symphony orchestras, theaters and other cultural institutions?

The “it” in question is their current love affair with the new media — [YouTube](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), the iPhone, and a slew of similar platforms.

Some examples: The [Baltimore Symphony](#) currently has an interview on [YouTube](#) with concert pianist [Andre Watts](#) discussing his career. The video was made in advance of his solo appearance with the orchestra in May. Also on [YouTube](#), the BSO is running a trailer for its 2012-2013 program.

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On Sept. 29, the Washington National Opera will simulcast a free live performance of [Mozart's opera](#) "Don Giovanni" at Nationals Park in its Opera in the Outfield series — now in its fifth year. The opera company is using [Facebook](#) to publicize the event.

Last year, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, under its telegenic young conductor [Gustavo Duhamel](#), launched a series of Sunday afternoon live HD broadcasts in some 450 movie theaters in the United States and [Canada](#) — much like the Metropolitan Opera has been doing for five years.

It's reasonable to ask whether live-streaming [Mr. Duhamel](#) conducting Beethoven's Seventh to viewers in Iowa does anything to improve the L.A. Philharmonic's financial picture. Performing simultaneously in hundreds of U.S. cities has been likened to going on tour without leaving home. That, presumably, can help with CD sales; but does all this activity attract more people into the concert hall or theater? (Sixty percent of contacts on the New York Philharmonic's [Facebook](#) page live outside the United States.)

The conventional wisdom among performing arts executives interviewed recently is that providing more information about upcoming performances — including background on the work and the artists — through [Facebook](#) and other social media sites tends to increase the number of one-time ticket sales, but doesn't help build up annual subscriptions, which traditionally are the backbone of opera, symphony or ballet attendance.

But marketing "is only one reason for using the new media," said [Jesse Rosen](#), president of the League of American Orchestras. "Another is building awareness, another is creating an entry point for people wanting to learn about orchestral music."



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Jo Johnson, digital marketing manager for the London Symphony Orchestra told a University of Westminster website, “We think of social media as community and brand building, to enhance and encourage goodwill towards the LSO ... if this results in a ticket or CD sale somewhere down the line, then that’s great.”

Washington National Opera spokesman Michael A. Solomon says that whole opera simulcasts strengthen the brand. The opera uses social media “to promote activities that we do besides opera performances,” such as education and the activities of young artists.

Some orchestras and theaters have gone overboard in their embrace of social media, encouraging members of the audience to tweet about an ongoing performance — not everyone’s idea of how to appreciate a performance. The WNO, by contrast, precedes each performance with a stern warning by Christina Scheppelmann, director of artistic operations, to turn off all cellphones and electronic devices.

With the sudden phenomenon of theater performances going viral on [YouTube](#), with sometimes hundreds of thousands of hits, performers’ unions sat up and took notice. None of the new technology was covered by existing contracts. New negotiations “were breaking new ground,” recalled [Deborah Newmark](#), director of symphonic electronic media at the American Federation of Musicians.

To cover its members, the musicians union negotiated two successive agreements as a section of the main contract. In 2000, the union signed a “Symphony, Opera, Ballet Audio-Visual Agreement.”

But that was before the emergence of [Facebook](#) (2003), [YouTube](#) (2005) and other platforms. What was needed, said [Ms. Newmark](#), was “really a new model” — hence the “Symphony, Opera, Ballet Integrated Media Agreement” that went into effect in 2009. The new deal has a



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media Agreement that went into effect in 2009. The new deal has a life-span until 2013, but the agreement “covers numerous technologies and has built-in provisions to take advantage of new technology should it come to the fore.”

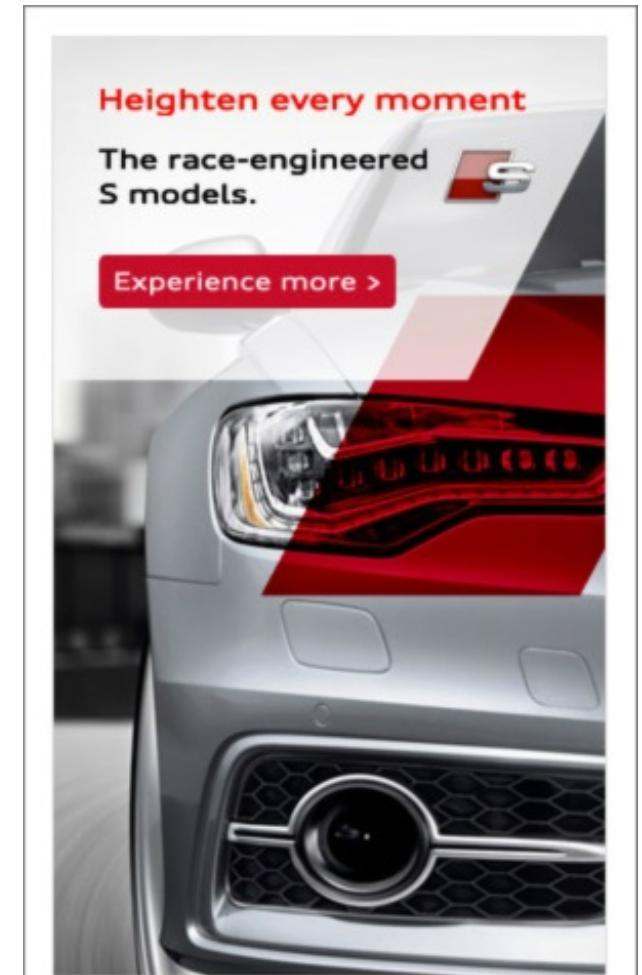
Negotiating a new agreement, she said, “involved enormous work” — no doubt a euphemism for some heated wrangling, although nobody will say so — because of the bewildering range of new technology.

The newly amalgamated Screen Actors Guild and American Federation of Television and Radio Artists also has signed a New Media Agreement on behalf of its members. But as [Mr. Rosen](#) pointed out, “The technology platform is changing all the time, and contracts with the unions are changing with them; in some recent arrangements, there’s been more latitude for digital distribution, and I think that’s the direction.”

Among the more recent changes is the Detroit Symphony Orchestra’s “Live from Orchestra Hall” HD webcasts, which attracted 120,000 views from 75 countries during its recently completed inaugural season, according to the DSO. The webcasts, which include a live feed of program notes, are free to all, although viewer donations are solicited. Individual donations averaged \$78, according to a statement released by the DSO.

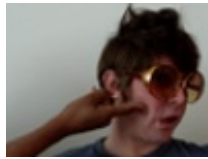
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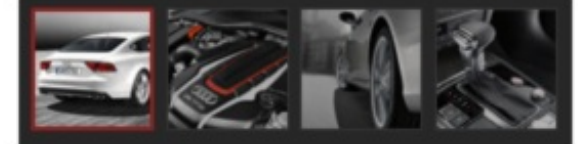
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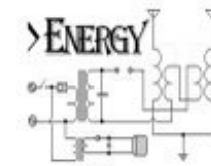
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