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Why Can't Streaming Services Get Classical Music Right?
June 04, 2015, 10:50 AM ET
URL: http://n.pr/1BMT1eq

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Why is classical music so hard to enjoy on streaming services? In one word, it's metadata. Metadata is the information that coexists with every digital music file: each and every piece of information about a selection of music that a listener might find useful to know, and what makes the information in one file discernible from the next. In the case of classical music, relevant and important metadata includes the name of the piece of music, the composer, the album it's from, the performers, the label that released the recording and the year it was recorded.

If that metadata is wrong, or — as is so often the case —
incomplete, then there's a big problem. Call it the "tree falling in a forest" conundrum: If classical recordings can't be found and heard, they functionally cease to exist.

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And it's easy to see how things can head south, very fast, when it comes to classical music: We're talking about a genre that, in its broadest strokes, encompasses hundreds of years' worth of music, many thousands of composers and performers, very similar titles (*ex*: Franz Joseph Haydn's Symphony No. 103 versus his Symphony No. 104), multiple movements within most compositions and innumerable recordings, with each piece of music recorded by many different artists. No wonder the metadata gets complicated.

Let's take one pretty "easy" case as just one example of a common metadata conundrum, based on the artist/song/album paradigm that governs most streaming sites and online stores. Those are the three pieces of metadata that consumers can see or use as search parameters, and even deciding who might qualify as the "artist" isn't clear, to use one example.

Say I want to hear Leonard Bernstein conducting Beethoven's Symphony No. 9. Well, Bernstein recorded this symphony three different times — with the New York Philharmonic, the Vienna Philharmonic and also at a historic performance in 1989 in Berlin shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, with members of *four* different orchestras (the London Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, the Kirov Orchestra from then-Leningrad and the Orchestre de Paris).

But let's keep our hypothetical more simple, and assume that we're looking for Bernstein's recording of the Beethoven Ninth with the New York Philharmonic. There are also four vocal soloists on that recording — soprano Martina Arroyo, mezzo-soprano Regina Sarfaty, tenor Nicholas di Virgilio and bass Norman Scott. The performance also includes the Juilliard Chorus, directed by Abraham Kaplan.

In this example, who would be listed as the artist? (Bernstein? Beethoven? The 100-plus players in the New York Philharmonic? Arroyo et al? The Juilliard Chorus or its conductor?) And as soon as some individual plugs in *one* of those names in the "artist" field as the sole piece of metadata in that category, then the other pieces of information are all too often essentially lost — and won't come up in searches.

To this end, I try a little experiment, searching for some specific pieces of classical music on some of the most popular streaming services. First, I try to look for Mozart's classic operatic comedy *The Marriage of Figaro* on Spotify. I decide to duck the matter of language in the title — the original, Italian *Le Nozze di Figaro* versus its English equivalent — by typing just "Mozart" and "Figaro" into the search bar. I get hundreds of results back, but Spotify recommends that I start with the one in which the artist field begins with "Donato Di Stefano."

OK. The track Spotify suggests to me is 4 minutes, 17 seconds long. The full opera runs about three and a half hours in total. So what is Spotify giving me? Ah, yes, the overture. But I only know that by hearing it. If I were a newbie, I'd have no clue. (Then I realize that if I know to hover my mouse on the teeny titling in the lower left, and wait patiently, staring intently at the screen, the word "overture" will eventually crawl by.) The soloists are also listed in a crawl running across the bottom left of the page in the "artist" field. So is the orchestra, the conductor, all the soloists, Mozart himself and the opera's librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte, who died in 1838. But if I were a newcomer who only recognized Mozart's name, I'd assume, entirely reasonably, that this Mr. Da Ponte sings on this album.

The next "Mozart" and "Figaro" track Spotify suggests is, again, the overture, this time played by the Wiener Philharmoniker — that is, the Vienna Philharmonic, but I have to know enough German to

translate it myself — conducted by Erich Kleiber. It's taken from a compilation album called *Mozart Hits*. Hmm. I like their snappy tempo and the crisp, clean playing. How do I find them performing the whole opera? I have to go searching again, starting from square one — this time looking for "Mozart" plus "Figaro" plus "Kleiber." Aha — there it is. After a bunch of compilations, including *Mozart Hits*, the full recording it comes up — twice, under two different album covers. (Are they the same recording? Different? How would a neophyte know?) I realize that this is Kleiber's famous 1955 recording featuring bass Cesare Siepi as Figaro ... but, again, there's no way I would learn that from Spotify.

I give up on searching for specifics, and switch over instead to a more passive kind of listening, the way a more casual music fan might choose to use the service. I decide to try out Spotify's classical radio station for some background listening while I work. (First challenge: scrolling through nearly two dozen other "genres & moods" options to wend my way to "classical.")

The first thing I hear is the middle movement of Beethoven's Sonata No. 23, the "Appassionata," a work written for solo piano. But there's no way for me to see that this is just one movement, not the whole piece. There's also no mention of who the pianist is, and the cover is so badly digitized that I have a hard time making it out. Pavel Serebriakov, I think it says: he was a Soviet-era artist, very little known in the West, who taught at the Leningrad Conservatory. Hmm. It's an odd choice, considering that there are probably over 100 (or more) currently-in-print recordings of this piece made by different pianists, many of them very famous. Why is this the one that Spotify has pulled up? There's no indication.

Next up: Pandora. I decide to plug in one of the most popular classical artists of our time, pianist Lang Lang, to create a "station." After I hear Lang Lang play a little Chopin, the next track up is Murray Perahia playing the slow middle movement of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5. I can just make out from the album cover that it's Bernard Haitink who is conducting, but there's no way of figuring out which orchestra I'm hearing. Also, there's no indication on Pandora that I'm listening to only this one movement out of a much larger work — Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto has three movements.

This is another enduring headache that vexes all of my streaming adventures. Classical music is generally (though not always) written in movements: Collections of smaller compositions, each quite different in emotion and impact, are juxtaposed together into one larger work. But in every instance, on all the streaming services, one track equals one movement, so I find myself skidding along from emotion to emotion, missing larger compositional arcs. What's on offer is bleeding chunks of music that are missing the rest of their limbs. (And if I buy a symphony or other long work to download, by the way, I'll have to pay for each movement individually, or else buy the whole album.)

Back to my Beethoven woes: Pandora has started in the second movement, smack in the middle of the whole concerto; there's no way to start at the beginning of the piece and hear it the whole way through.

Once I'm through Beethoven's supreme yearning and tenderness — and missing the concerto's triumphant and jubilant concluding third movement altogether — I'm thrust into the middle of something else: a slow movement of one of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's six symphonies for strings and continuo. Which symphony exactly? Who knows? I have no idea which movement this is, either. Pandora doesn't divulge this information.

Wanting to get away from more languid picks, I type "Stravinsky" into Pandora's search bar, hoping to hear something bracing. It puts me in the middle of his orchestral suite to the ballet "The Firebird." Pandora informs me that it has picked music that "exemplifies the musical style of Igor Stravinsky which features a 20th century ballet score, a tranquil mood, a subdued, expressive aesthetic, an acclaimed work and a well-known composer."

So what about a not well-known composer? After all, one of the delights of streaming is stumbling upon music you don't already know. So I type in "Havergal Brian," a not-very-well-known 20th-century British composer. What Brian lacks in name recognition, he makes up in prolixity: He wrote more than 200 pieces in all, including more than 30 symphonies. Surely, Pandora might have some gems of his to share. In response, Pandora feeds me the last movement of Dvorak's Ninth Symphony, "From The New World." Pandora's Music Genome Project earnestly explains to me that the Dvorak was selected for my "Havergal Brian" station for its qualities of being "an acclaimed work, a well-known composer, a romantic-era style, a symphony orchestra and tonal harmony." It's also one of the most popular classical works ever written. So much for new music discovery.

I decide also to check out the recently added music playlists that Amazon now offers to its Prime members. In 2015, these playlists are like a flashback to the late 1990s, when nearly every classical music label offered easy-to-swallow, mood-driven compilations to serve as aural wallpaper, from *The Most Relaxing Classical Album in the World....Ever!* to *Bach at Bedtime*. Amazon's playlists read down like variations on a theme: Among them are "Classical Dreamtime," "Relaxing Classical Music," "Relaxing Classical Piano," "Classical for Yoga," "Classical for Meditation" and "In Flight: Classical" (tag line: "Make relaxing classical music your soundtrack as you take to the skies").

I'm writing as I listen, so I try Amazon's "Mellow Classical for Work" playlist for inspiration. There's no listing of any of the composers anywhere, so the "song" listings read along the lines of: "Quintetto No. 4 In Re Maggiore: 'Fanda...'" (That's it.) I have no clue who the composer is. The playlist also includes a lot of New Age selections that set my teeth on edge, thereby missing the "mellow" target by a pretty big margin.

With that, I head over to iTunes Radio. I choose the contemporary classical station, and am dropped headfirst into the fourteenth section of Steve Reich's "Music for 18 Musicians." Once again, I have no idea who the artists are: I see Steve Reich's name, the name of the piece, the name of the movement, and

nothing else. (I sense a theme emerging.) As soon as that track is over, the service feeds me a Ravi Shankar selection called "Meetings Along the Edge." What is this doing here on the contemporary (Western) classical station? Oh, I know — it's one of his collaborations with Philip Glass. How do I happen to know this? Only because I produced the reissues of their work together myself. Otherwise, it would be a complete mystery — there's no mention of Philip Glass anywhere on the page.

Next up, I get a track from a Chanticleer Christmas album. The piece is called "Ave Maria." Who's the composer? Not a clue. I like the vocal textures, but I'd never be able to figure out who wrote it without interrogating Google: I'd need to find a site that lists the specific album that iTunes has shown me — from a vocal group that has recorded no less than eight Christmas projects — that *also* lists the composers of each track. (Metadata!) And that's a huge pain for something that just caught my ear momentarily.

Frustrated, I go to iTunes' "Best of Classical" channel — and I get five Mozart selections in a row. The last one is an aria from ... *The Marriage of Figaro*. Sigh. At least I feel like I've come full circle.

The other huge issue, in terms of classical streaming, is sound quality. It stands to reason that picky, "elitist" classical music fans would also be picky about audio standards as well. And while it's entirely true that bit rates don't matter one whit when you're listening through standard-issue earbuds, most of the best-established current services don't emphasize great audio quality. Mahler's epic, sweeping Fifth Symphony, for example, is a watery shadow of itself when I hear it (listening on very good headphones) at 160 kpbs on Spotify's free service. Lossless sound is one of the biggest points of differentiation that Tidal is trying to make for itself, but so far the scope of their classical offerings and the quality of their metadata have been a disappointment.

The problems, then, are obvious. But do the streaming services care about making things better for classical music lovers?

Right now, it seems pretty unlikely. Classical music, as a genre, hovers at about three percent of total market share in the U.S. What's good enough for more than 90 percent of these services' consumer base is, simply, good enough.

Internationally, the need to upgrade streaming options appears to be even less urgent — at least for now. The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, the organization that represents the interests of the recording industry globally, just released its annual report on digital music in mid-April. Germany is certainly still one of the most important centers for classical music worldwide, and serves as A&R home to staple record labels like Deutsche Grammophon (DG), Sony Masterworks and ECM. The country also remains a huge market for classical music.

According to the 2015 IFPI report, classical, combined with two other genres that tend to appeal to older

listeners ("schlager" and German regional folk music) makes up 16 percent of Germany's total market sales. (The figure for classical alone has hovered somewhere between six and eight percent in recent years.) Across all genres in the U.S., the IFPI reports that revenues are now precisely split between 46 percent physical (CDs and vinyl) and 46 percent digital, including downloads and streaming. (The remainder is made up by performance and synch rights.) In Germany, however, physical product still makes up 70 percent of total sales. As such, the desires and evolving habits of American consumers may not be a top priority for the classical music recording industry.

Even so, a few classical-only online stores, both in the United States and elsewhere, have sprung up, advertising precise and easily searchable metadata, and often high-quality audio, among their main selling points. I spoke with Sean Hickey, the vice president of sales and business development for Naxos of America, which distributes more than 600 record labels. (Hickey is also himself an accomplished composer.) Not only does Naxos run two streaming sites of its own, but it also does business with all the music stores and streaming services.

Hickey says that there's a very clear reason why I was running into so much trouble when I was searching for music by particular composers and performers. "On the mainstream platforms," he explains, "searches rely on popularity, not accuracy. A more discerning site would go the other way around."

Hickey adds that some of the biggest names in streaming have courted the idea of doing more to cater to classical listeners — but so far, from his perspective, it's been just talk. "Classical punches way above its weight, percentage-wise, in terms of how popular it is on streaming services like Spotify," he notes. "Some of the most popular Spotify playlists on include classical-centric ones like 'Intense Studying' and 'Peaceful Piano.' And some of them have gotten streamed hundreds of thousands of times." But at the same time, Hickey adds, that doesn't mean that they've made search capabilities on their service any better. "Spotify has made rumblings many times about doing more, and being a lot more specific," he says, "but nothing's been done yet."

In terms of actually having accurate and well-refined metadata in their possession, Hickey says, iTunes is "head and shoulders above everyone else. They have one or two musicologists on staff," he adds, "and their style guide is nearly 60 pages long." (iTunes' requirements for classical music metadata alone takes up seven pages in its October 2013 iteration.)

"But the problem, and the frustration for classical fans," Hickey continues, "is that they don't utilize the strength of all that data. They say that one day it will be as rich or robust as anyone else, including the classical specialist sites — but not yet."

In the meantime, a number of new and already established classical music sites have raced to make their own proprietary streaming services, focused entirely on classical music lovers. They include the popular

online store Arkiv Music, which launched its own subscription streaming service last December; Classical Archives, which was originally founded in 1994 as a site for free MIDI versions of classical music, before repositioning itself as a digital download and streaming site; and Classics Online HD LL, which industry giant Naxos soft-launched in November as a consumer-targeted parallel to its Naxos Music Library service, which is aimed primarily at schools, libraries and other institutions. Sony Music Entertainment also launched a very brief-lived and now defunct online download store called Ariama in 2009, but shut its doors within two years of launching. (I was the founding editor for Ariama, and left Ariama in 2011 to join NPR.)

These classical-dedicated sites are a solution for some people — those who know that they exist, for starters, who are willing to fork over the subscription fees — which currently range from $8 to $19.95 a month — and who are willing to open up yet another site or app on their computers or mobile devices. And for the vast majority of music fans — those who aren't knowledgeable about classical per se, but who might be curious and interested in hearing more — classical music remains distant and inaccessible. It's everyone's loss.