

The Art of Programming

Managing expectations to build loyal fans with content and sequencing

During their creation and staging musicals, operas, ballets, plays (and subsequent revivals) spend immense energy editing an experience that has flow which clarifies and amplifies the story. Content and sequencing are critical to maximizing emotional impact opportunities.

Content and sequencing in the concert setting offer opportunities to increase the emotional impact of your product. I use programming to deliver an expectation that is set by concert title and marketing. I use sequencing to deliver a concert energy that goes beyond what an audience member expects. When expectations are exceeded, fans are made. Fans are advocates (They'll tell their friends about their exceeded expectations). Advocates create momentum. Momentum leads to increased opportunity.

Programming serves whom?

In nearly 25 years of programming concerts there are always three constituents I am serving as the programmer. If my goal is to build a fan base for my organization's concerts, then *the audience* must be included in my thought process about programming. If my goal is to create a passion for music where performers are engaged in music that teaches and inspires them, then *the ensemble* members must be included in my thought process about programming. If my goal is to give myself opportunity to work on music that teaches and inspires me, then my *personal artistic wishes* must be included in my thought process about programming.

I will admit that consistently fulfilling the expectations of all three constituents with different needs (audience, ensemble and self) with repertoire that satisfies everyone is difficult. Tinkering with the order of a program to create an additional energy resulting from programmatic flow is also important. This is done in staged works routinely - why would we not apply this ethos to the concert setting?

Fabulous concerts are not just about putting well rehearsed music on stage and playing it. That is a fine concert. If you desire a loyal fan base for your organization then content and sequencing is a programming skill set that must be developed.

We want all of these things, right?

Of course! However, there is a priority list of importance to these constituents which shifts between the audience and the performers depending on the situation (i.e. Halloween concert (more audience centric) differing from a festival performance (more ensemble centric)). For my programming situation - a community ensemble - the audience comes first. If the audience doesn't come, the group has fewer ticket sales which means less revenue which leads to less programming variety which leads to less interest from the band members. Inside of making the audience experience the priority, I need to program music the community musicians (volunteers) want to play. There has to be enough variety to keep their interest. There has to be music that both stretches them and is also technically achievable enough to create feelings of mastery upon performance. *The synergy of musician enjoyment and audience delight creates the energy we hope for in a concert experience!*

The Audience Expectation

Brand driven commerce depends on a scenario in which an expectation is portrayed strongly enough to create a decision to purchase (or participate). Consumer satisfaction derives from the portrayed expectation being met or exceeded.

For example, fast foods chains set an expectation for how their food looks, smells, tastes and costs. When those expectations are advertised so that you'll purchase, you expect to have those expectations met. If they are, you feel satisfied and are likely to purchase, again. If they are exceeded, you become a fan and will definitely purchase again AND tell your friends. If expectations are not met, you are not satisfied and therefore may not purchase, again. (AND - will probably tell your friends.)

This is the same opportunity we have when we present a concert. An expectation can be portrayed so that a potential audience member understands what to expect. This sets up the organization for the opportunity to meet and exceed their expectations thereby creating fans who continue to consume our organization's product and potentially support in additional ways.

How is a concert expectation set?

Thematic concerts offer an excellent way to portray an expectation. Titles like *An American Dream*, *Bright Lights - Big City*, *Irish Eyes are Smiling*, *Embraceable You*, *Home for the Holidays*, or *All That Jazz* are descriptive enough by words alone to set an expectation for what kind of music will be heard.

Themes that are narrow, while difficult to program for, offer vivid opportunities to delve into a theme more deeply. Ethnic concerts fit these nicely. For example - *Bella Notte* (Italian), *Midnight in Moscow* (Russian), *Cry of the Celts* (Irish/Scottish), *Oktoberfest* (German), *The Mambo Kings* (Latin), etc.

Themes that are more broad allow for a more loose programming approach. For example - *Windows of the World*, *The Bandstand*, *Anything Goes*, and *Lollapalooza*.

Early season concert theme examples - *Another Opening - Another Show*, *Curtain Up!*, *New Beginnings*, and *Dawn's Early Light*. End of the season concert theme examples - *The Journey Ahead*, *The Road Before Us*, *Celebration*, and *Passages*.

How can a concert title be designed to increase the clarity of the expectation?

Turning a concert title into a logo (i.e. picture) increases the description of your expectation without adding words.

This example showcases a theme in plain text:

The Imaginarium Concert Band
Presents
Another Opening, Another Show

This example showcases the theme in a logo:

The Imaginarium Concert Band
Presents



This example showcases a theme in plain text:

The Imaginarium Wind Symphony
Presents

Summon the Heroes

This example showcases the theme in a logo:

The Imaginarium Wind Philharmonic Society
Presents



This example showcases a theme in plain text:

The Imaginarium Concert Band
Presents
Cry of the Celts

This example showcases the theme in a logo:

The Imaginarium Concert Band
Presents



Turning a theme into a logo gives the consumer a chance to view the title in a picture that (when done well) creates a look and a feeling that makes the expectation more vivid. Consumers often spend very little time making purchase decisions. This purchase decision is often driven visually. Fonts are fine. Logos portray more detail and do it in one image.

OK - my title has been turned into a logo - now what?

Marketing copy (if used) should be describing in more detail what the consumer should expect. If the programming backs up the expectation set up by the logo and any marketing copy, then expectations are met. For example - the poster tells me it is an Irish themed concert. I go to the concert expecting Irish music. The programming delivers on this expectation and I leave with my expectations met.

If quality is also portrayed in the title (*World's Greatest Concert, The Be All - End All, The Alpha & The Omega*) or the name of the group (The XYZ Wind Symphony, the DEF Wind Philharmonic Society, 'America's Oldest Musical Ensemble', 'Pride of the West', etc. then the quality of the performance will be a part of the consumer's expectation.

Deviations in repertoire that do not match the theme diminish the expectations set up by the concert title/logo. If Halloween is the theme, do not play Christmas music. If Holiday Pops is your theme, do not ONLY play Christmas music. If the reference of the repertoire to the theme is oblique at best, either explain to the audience how it fits the theme or find a new piece.

Do not waste any opportunity to service audience expectations if loyal fans are what you seek!

The same kind of demand on delivering a marching band show, winter guard show, or drumline show where the music serves the story (i.e. theme) should be applied to thematic concert experiences.

OK - I've set an expectation. Clarified the expectation with a logo. (Designed by a professional or a student artist.) Matched the repertoire to the theme. The rehearsal cycle is appropriate for the music selected. Everything is in place to meet expectations musically and thematically.

Then how do I go about exceeding expectations?

Sequencing

My first experience with sequencing concerts came at an early age when I played in a polka band. The lead accordionist (yes, there was more than one) would work each set list so it would include a variety of dance types (polka, waltz, two-step, etc.) and always made sure the opener and closer were of specific tempi. The slow tempi always followed the fast during a set. Medium tempi were the opening dances and the most energetic dance would close the set. And the RIGHT tempo for each piece was sacrosanct.

While a dance band serves a different constituency, it is a template that delivers to the consumer an experience of variety, both in content and the tempi sequence, which dancers at a social dance enjoy.

Professional performing groups do the same thing to a slightly different template. (Great thing about templates, aside from being a guide, is they become a great reference point for experimental deviation.)

So as not to unveil the current 'behind the scenes' maneuvering that happens regarding sequencing with today's artists, I'll give an example from a group's history. During Sam Pilafian's tenure with the Empire Brass Quintet, the sequencing of concerts was an often used tool to generate extra energy at critical moments in a concert. First half of the concert would work generally as such:

Opener - exciting tempo - often staged by entering from back of the hall while playing or performing antiphonally.

Another piece with 'up' energy

Solo Feature - usually slower and more about tone than technique

Stretch - often the most challenging listening on the concert. Longer pieces, often with multiple movements.

Solo Feature - usually quicker and more technical

Closer - most exciting tempo or emotional content of the half. Generates an emotional buzz during the break.

INTERMISSION

Opener - exciting tempo - usually a departure from the style of the first half.

Medium tempo

Slower tempo - often a ballad

Quicker tempo

Closer - most exciting piece of the concert.

Encore - Slower and beautiful

Encore - medium, often comedic

Encore - Up tempo

Encore - Most up tempo and wild energy

This particular template includes a 'false ending' as a part of the concert plan. I went to more than a 100 EBQ concerts in my early musical life. I always left thinking, "WOW - What a great show! We got a ton of encores tonight! What a bonus!! Those guys are the BEST."

I never looked at my watch to realize that the concert including the four encores was actually a normal length concert. I never compared one concert to the next and thought, "Wait a minute. They always play a few encores." I would simply leave in a state of emotional overdrive in which my expectations were far exceeded.

What EBQ had done was publish a false ending to the program on purpose. When you left the concert hall after what appeared to be 3 or 4 spontaneous extra pieces, you had actually experienced the concert exactly as the performers had planned.

Sound like manipulation? Call it what you want. As music educators we obsess constantly about the sequence of music in the marching band show, the winter guard show, the drumline show, etc. Why do we minimize this aspect when it comes to the concert setting?

The order that music comes in a concert should not be random if the opportunity to maximize the emotional impact of the music is your goal.

What creates the feeling of exceeded expectations?

The Ramp

The measure of exceeded expectations is NOT counted in the number of encores performed. Having an audience 'go over the top' emotionally in a concert set is a result of stacking emotions together. My personal description of it is feeling like I am racing down a rollercoaster hill and then at the very end (of the concert) there is a ramp that catapults me (emotionally) in an upward direction. My emotional reaction to feeling this emotional ramp is usually shouts of 'BRAVO' and an uproarious standing ovation.

If you made note of the last 4-5 pieces a pop artist plays in their concert set you would notice a pattern. They certainly do not play all their No. 1 hits in the first 30 minutes of a concert. In a 2 hour pop concert, the last 15 minutes of music usually have an emotional 'ramp' that leaves the listening with a feeling of momentum.

In a 12 minute drum corps show, the last 90-120 seconds of the show have a similar 'ramp'.

Listen for this type of 'ramp' in the last 2-3 minutes of most symphonies. Listen to the last 2-4 minutes of a Strauss tone poem, last 6-8 minutes of a Stravinsky ballet, or the last 15-20 minutes of a Wagner opera. There is a 'ramp' of emotional content brought about by a variety of compositional craft techniques which change tempo, range, density, texture, etc.

These same emotional ramps exist in literature. This is one of the reasons many readers will read the END of the book FIRST because they know that is where the plot line finally comes together for a big emotional payout.

In the Empire Brass template, the 'ramp' actually happened twice in the second half. The first 20 minutes of the 2nd half were a ramp which brought them to the first encore. The first encore thru the last encore was another emotional ramp steeper than the first one in terms of emotional payoff. Only the last encore was an actual encore from the perspective of the ensemble.

If there is a piece of music that demonstrates the emotional ramp as a general template...any march that ends with a *grandioso* strain encapsulates all the emotional sequencing of a good concert 'ramp.' For example, *Stars & Stripes Forever*, *Emblem of Unity*, *Americans We*, and *The Vanished Army* are marches that showcase one type of example of an emotional ramp.

Is ending loud and fast the only way to create an emotional ramp? Of course, not. I often close a holiday concert with *White Christmas* as the encore. The end of the energetic emotional ramp is the piece prior. *White Christmas* serves almost as a recessionary.

My ramps vary based on the theme of the concert. Their emotional content changes based on where I want the most emotional energy release to happen. When I'm fussing with the content sequence, it is usually with this part of the concert. When I'm picking repertoire, I'm looking for pieces that will create a ramp. I don't use false endings with my community ensemble. I do, however, use them frequently as a soloist.

The real message here? Spend as much time with concert sequencing as you would with a field show. If you don't design your field shows, make a note of the sequence of shows you like. Notice the sequencing of great shows, books, movies, musicals, operas especially the last 10% of them. Usually awareness wrought of a voyage of self-discovery creates enough momentum for you to pay attention to this aspect of concert presentation.

If the concert architecture is set up to tug the audience's emotional chain thereby creating the ultimate energy at the end of the show (or in the middle), AND there is a little laughter and/or a little love from the microphone...audience leaves wanting more because we have exceeded their expectations.

The Performers' Expectation

Performers want to sound good by performance time. Performers also want to feel progress in a rehearsal cycle. These ideals require attention by the programmer to match the difficulty of the piece to the developmental level of the ensemble in a way that allows for improvement over the time invested in the piece and allows for the ensemble to achieve a performance level that does not diminish the expectations of the audience. This becomes increasingly important to balance as the audience develops a longer relationship with your organization.

In my experience, more than improvement and quality perception, performers want to play for an energetic audience. When an audience is giving their energy towards a performance, performers feed off this energy. It is one of those indescribable feelings to those that do not participate in performance of any kind. *The performer-audience energy exchange is concert magic...* for both parties.

Programmers owe it to the ensemble members to generate an enthusiastic audience.

Enthusiastic audiences generate more audience members because consumers have become fans who will advocate for you in the form of enthusiastic referrals and continued support.

Personal Expectation

For me, personal satisfaction on an artistic level comes, in part, from programming success. When the audience leaps to its feet at the end of a show and lingers in the hall and lobby afterwards exchanging outcries of joy and exuberance over their experience, that is satisfying to me. To see the ensemble light up as a result of this audience reaction is immensely satisfying.

There is great art in individual pieces of music. The combination and flow of an entire program where all constituencies are satisfied is the art in programming.