How to Make a Radio Program

BY EUGENE SYMPHONY

Partly inspired by the shutdown of performances, Eugene Symphony launched a limited edition broadcast series on KLCC-FM, the local NPR station. Hosted and produced by Executive Director Scott Freck, each program focuses on a single concert and incorporates interviews with composers, performers, and conductors, interspersed with clips of the performance.

KLCC aired the first episode in this three-part series in May 2020 with the second broadcast in July. The final episode is slated for Sunday, September 20 at 1 p.m.

As opposed to our long-standing concert broadcasts on KWAX, hosted for nearly three decades by Caitriona Bolster and now helmed by Peter van de Graaff, these KLCC programs are much more “produced” to incorporate interviews, brief clips of music for explication, and short works or movements of longer works, rather than whole symphonies and the like.

As such, they are a bit more time-intensive, as we generally just deliver the CDs of concert recordings to KWAX and let Peter do the rest. In the case of the KLCC programs, they are made up of up to four different kinds of source material, all stitched together into a seamless hour-long production. One might liken the process to quilting – in which various components of piecework are created separately and then layered together into a finished whole.

As the intermission on live performances began to stretch farther into the foreseeable future, Scott called upon a skill set learned at a previous position with the North Carolina Symphony. When the North Carolina Symphony hired a new Music Director in 2004, they also launched a monthly radio program on NPR affiliate WUNC. Scott had never done anything in radio before, but armed with a modicum of musical knowledge and a yen for learning...
new things, he got a hot tip and successfully recruited nationally recognized journalist David Hartman to be the host. (Some of you might remember David as the original host of Good Morning, America! from 1975 to 1987).

David did the interviews with conductors and artists, Scott wrote the scripts, and together with a staffer from WUNC, they started making radio programs. Scott attributes much of his producing education to David Hartman – how to write for the ear and not the eye, how to unfold a narrative, and most of all, how to write efficiently. His first script for David in 2004 came to eight pages, and his last in 2010 ran to about three-and-a-half. Scott says he “remains forever grateful to David for his patience and tutelage. He is one of the finest humans I have ever known.”

With more than 50 radio programs in North Carolina in his back pocket and faced with a continued shutdown of concert activity, Scott set out to make a ‘magazine-style’ program for Eugene Symphony’s audience, with a behind-the-scenes feel that would also appeal to the larger community.

The process, of course, begins with the concerts themselves. As you’ve surely noticed from all the microphones and wires hanging above the Silva Concert Hall stage, the Symphony hires a sound engineer to capture high-quality archival recordings – Bill Barnett of Gung Ho Studios does the honors, and typically he arrays around 16 very sensitive mics of various sorts. Francesco and Scott then choose which programs have both the most compelling performances and most interesting backstories to tell. A script is roughed in, with introductions for each piece and interview subject, writing just enough to have a shape to the conversations to come, before booking time at one of KLCC’s small recording studio rooms. There, Scott records telephone interviews with Francesco, the guest soloist, or composer, using a system that patches a phone line through a sound mixing board, which is attached to a computer using digital editing software called Cool Edit Pro.

Once recorded, Scott returns to his laptop for more editing using a program similar to the studio’s Cool Edit Pro, Audition by Adobe. Each interview is combed through to find interesting sections about each of the musical works, and to clean up some of the inevitable ‘ums’ and ‘ers’ that populate organic human speech, and generally tighten them for time. (You’d be surprised how much editing can be done within an interview, sometimes splicing even between parts of a word or sound.)

Once those are in good shape, it’s time to go back and finish the script in order to make it flow easily with the content in the interviews, including intros and outros, as they’re called. Scott returns to the KLCC studio and records voice-overs of the script. This part can take up to 45 minutes for the self-admitted ‘advanced amateur voice talent.’ Once the recorded voice-overs are completed, it’s back to the laptop for more editing work in the Audition program. The voice-overs are cut into bite-sized pieces that can be inserted into a multitrack session, alongside the interviews and concert recording clips. Often, if the interview subject is describing a particular musical moment, Scott fades in a clip underneath their speech so the listener can hear it nearly simultaneously – he says that’s the most fun part, and thinks it adds a lot to the finished product. Occasionally,
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there will be an addition of a fourth source, such as a sample of the medieval hurdy gurdy used in the July program to illustrate one inspiration for Missy Mazzoli’s Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres).

Then, once all of the sources are assembled, it’s quilting time! Each of the 40 or so sound files can be individually or collectively manipulated – moved around in time relative to the other clips, faded in and out by volume, and adjusted so that each element falls nicely into place, one after the next. It’s both a challenging and rewarding process, and the goal is to achieve a finished program of exactly 59 minutes to match KLCC’s broadcast window.

The third and final installment of this series will be on September 20 at 1 p.m., and then will be available for streaming on KLCC.org for 30 days after that. This program will feature music from our October 2019 concert, and includes interviews with Francesco, composer Matt Browne of our First Symphony Project, and piano virtuosos Christina and Michelle Naughton.

We hope you can tune in, and that you will have a bit more insight into how it all works!

STEP-BY-STEP

You’ll need: a software program for editing audio. Scott primarily uses Audition by Adobe. Another option is Garage Band, a free program that comes already installed on Apple products.

1
Rough out a script after choosing a topic for your radio program.

2
Record interviews. Studio equipment helps, but you can do this on a smartphone, too.

3
Use audio editing software to edit your interviews to its most interesting parts.

4
Go back to your script and round out the story by adding intros and outros and record the voice-overs.

5
Gather the pieces: interviews, voiceovers and any additional audio that provides context for the content.

6
It’s quilting time! Stitch all of the pieces together to tell your story.

Once all of the sources are assembled, it’s quilting time!

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