

## THE SYMPHONY CONCERT AS MARKETING PRODUCT

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**SUMMARY.** After having historically been reluctant to embrace marketing beyond mere advertisement, considering it incompatible with the artistic mission, symphony orchestras are having marketing as an integral part of their operations. With marketing scholars increasingly working with non-profit organizations, the field of arts marketing has also developed. Marketing theories are applied to the symphony orchestra, taking into account its characteristics. The study focuses on how the 4 Ps theory of the marketing mix is applied to the live symphony concert as a product. After examining the concert program itself emphasizing the importance of the way the repertoire is presented, we detail various elements of the augmented product, focusing on program notes (including digital offerings) and pre-concert talks.

**Keywords:** symphony orchestras, symphony concerts, marketing mix theory, product

### Introduction

For quite a long time the idea of using marketing in the high-end arts sector has often been met with negative feelings. Symphony orchestras, like the other non-profit organizations in the field, considered marketing, generally used by for profit commercial enterprises, to be incompatible with their mission to promote high culture and to contribute to the cultural enrichment of their audience and their community by delivering artistic excellence. Wheater commercial enterprises track their success in financial measures, symphony orchestras have to balance commercial sustainability with artistic integrity. Marketing was mistakenly considered to be aimed at increasing financial profit over other consideration and thus “a killer of excellence”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Firych, Piotr. “The Concept of Audience Development vs. Arts Marketing. Critical Analysis.” *Journal of Cultural Management and Policy*, vol. 2024, no. 1, 2024, pp. 165–79, p. 170.



Historically, the only form of marketing used for classical concerts has been the simple “marketing as promotion”, which means just “informing potential customers of upcoming events”. It was in the 1970s that cultural organizations started realizing that they need to professionally market their offering to the public.<sup>3</sup> The first marketing departments were created and from the 1980s the non-profit arts organizations were increasingly considering marketing as an integral part of their operations.

Orchestras, like other nonprofit arts organizations, “exist in a market economy” and “are not except from its demands”<sup>4</sup>. Live concerts played by orchestras to their paying audience are an economic offering, making the symphony orchestra a market entity. The present study focuses on the symphony concert as a product for marketing.

### Marketing mix

The study of arts marketing is a comparatively new concept which emerged in the 1960s. Starting in the 1970s, marketing scholars “proposed that the marketing discipline would be enriched by working with the ‘marketing’ problems of non-profit and public organizations – not just the marketing problems of commercial organizations”.

One of the most important theories of marketing is the theory of Marketing Mix. In 1953, Neil Borden, Harvard professor of marketing and advertising, brought the term “marketing mix” into the arena of marketing theory in his presidential address to the American Marketing Association.<sup>5</sup> In the article “The Concept of the Marketing Mix”, published in 1964<sup>6</sup>, he recalled that the phrase was suggested by a study from 1948, in which his Harvard colleague, professor of business administration James Culliton, described the business executive as an “artist”, a “mixer of ingredients”.<sup>7</sup> Borden’s original marketing mix, which included 12 elements, was explicitly tailored for the **economy of**

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<sup>3</sup> Heilbrun, James, and Charles Gray. *The Economics of Art and Culture: An American Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 2001 quoted in Kolb, Bonita M. *Marketing for Cultural Organizations: New Strategies for Attracting Audiences to Classical Music, Dance, Museums, Theatre and Opera*. 3rd ed., Taylor & Francis, 2013, p. 1

<sup>4</sup> DiMaggio, Paul. “Paul J. DiMaggio, “When the Profit is Quality: Cultural Institutions in the Marketplace,” *Museum News*, 63, no. 5 (1985), pp. 28-35, p. 29, in Trevis Newton, *Orchestra Management Handbook: Building Relationships in Turbulent Times*. Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> American Marketing Association “About AMA.”

<sup>6</sup> Borden, Neil H. “The Concept of the Marketing Mix.” *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 4, no. June, 1964, pp. 7-12.

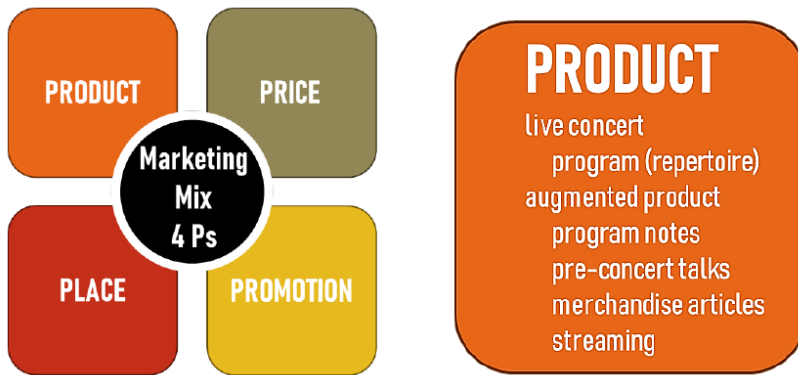
<sup>7</sup> Culliton, James William. *The Management of Marketing Costs*. Andover Press, 1948, p. 5--6.

**goods.** (“Elements of Marketing Mix of Manufacturers”). Jerome McCarthy, author of the seminal 1960 book *Basic Marketing: A Managerial Approach*<sup>8</sup>, proposed the 4 Ps theory, which became the leading theory of the marketing mix. The 4 Ps of marketing – Product, Price, Place, Promotion – changed the marketing strategy of businesses and remain relevant for business strategies to this day. Philip Kotler, considered the “father of modern marketing”, widely popularized the

4 Ps. Kotler’s book *Marketing Management*, first published in 1967<sup>9</sup>, has reached its 16th edition<sup>10</sup> and is the most widely used textbook in marketing around the world.

The Marketing Mix theory has been extended from the economy of goods to the **economy of services**, with another 3 Ps added (PPP) to suit the characteristics of services. Symphony concerts are a service. With the advent of the concept of the **experience economy**, introduced by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore in 1998<sup>11</sup> positing that customers want to buy not just goods and services, but memorable experiences, symphony concerts are also considered a prime example of the experience economy.

Figure 1



4Ps of Marketing Mix for symphony orchestras **Product**

<sup>8</sup> McCarthy, E. J. *Basic Marketing: A Managerial Approach*. R. D. Irwin, Inc., 1960.

<sup>9</sup> Kotler, Philip. *Marketing Management: Analysis, Planning, and Control*. Prentice-Hall, 1967.

<sup>10</sup> Kotler, Philip, Kevin Lane Keller, and Alexander Chernev. *Marketing Management, Global Edition*. Pearson Higher Ed, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Pine, B. Joseph II, and James H. Gilmore. “Welcome to the Experience Economy.” *Harvard Business Review*, July-Aug. 1998, pp. 97-105.

In a business context, “product” refers to the offering, either a physical good or a service, that a customer purchases. It is “the critical element in the mix, with all other decisions relating to this element”.<sup>12</sup> Physical goods (often actually called “products”, as they are “produced” in the goods-based industrial economy) are tangible. Services, events, or experiences are intangible. The offering (both tangible and intangible) is a complete package that includes the entire experience a customer has with a product, from the initial purchase to after-sales support.

### **Symphony Concert as product**

“Product is probably the most important (and controversial) of the marketing Ps for arts organizations because the artistic product is so deeply intertwined with mission.”<sup>13</sup> Musicians are reluctant to call music a “product”, as it “raises questions of commodification and selling out”.<sup>14</sup>

Symphony orchestras offer an intangible “service”. The traditional product of a symphony orchestra is the live concert: repertoire, performers and the format of presenting the musical works. A high-level powerful and emotionally charged performance is the core experience the audiences have in the concert hall. The format of presenting the musical works is an important feature of the live concert, with a deep impact on the audience’s experience. However, there are additional components to the “product” live concert, which in marketing are called “augmented product”. These include, for instance, pre-concert talks and the opportunity to meet some of the performers during the intermission or after the concert, program notes which support and enhance the concert experience. Some orchestras also offer other tangible goods for sale, like CDs and merchandise articles. Modern technology added streaming of live concerts and access to audio and video archives to the products offered by some orchestras. One of the most famous and successful examples is the *Digital Concert Hall*, initiated by the Berlin Philharmonic.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Drummond, Graeme, and John Ensor. *Introduction to Marketing Concepts*. Elsevier, 2005, p. 23

<sup>13</sup> Americans for the Arts. *Minding Your Marketing P's*. n.d. *National Arts Marketing Project, Americans for the Arts*, p. 14.

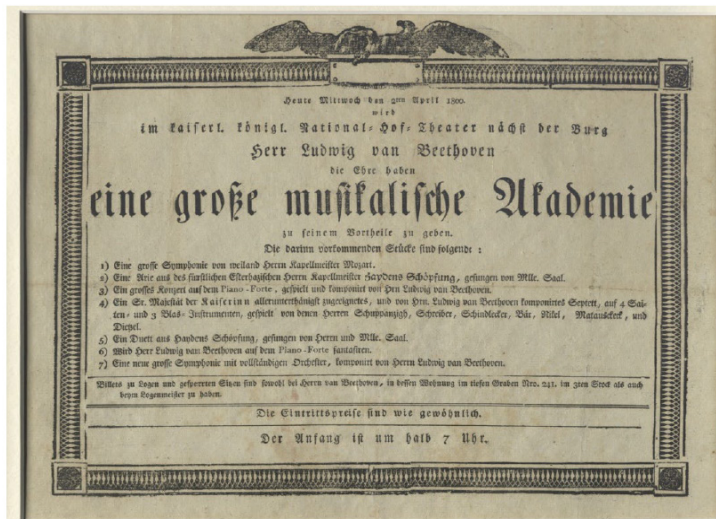
<sup>14</sup> O'Reilly, Daragh et al. “Marketing Live Music”. *Coughing and Clapping: Investigating Audience Experience*, edited by Karen Burland and Stephanie Pitts, Ashgate, 2014, pp 7--20, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Berliner Philharmoniker. “The Digital Concert Hall of the Berliner Philharmoniker.” *Berliner Philharmoniker*

### Concert program (Repertoire)

The repertoire of early orchestra concerts consisted mainly of new works, as “it was unusual for music to remain in circulation for more than a generation”<sup>16</sup>. Haydn wrote new symphonies for the concerts of Prince Nikolaus at Eszterháza as well as for the public concerts organized by the impresario Johann Peter Solomon in London (the twelve so-called *London Symphonies*). The repertoire of the musical Akademien organized by Mozart and Beethoven in Vienna consisted mostly of their works. When Beethoven also included works by Haydn and Mozart in his first Akademie in 1800, these were also works by “contemporary” composers. It is the merit of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy to have revived music of Johann Sebastian Bach almost 80 years after the composer’s death, organizing and conducting in 1829, as a nineteen-year-old, the first performance of Bach’s “St. Matthew’s Passion” in 100 years.<sup>17</sup> From there on the interest in music of the past continued to grow: at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century music by composers of past generations formed the core of concert programs. William Weber considers that “one of the most fundamental transformations in Western musical culture has been the rise of a canon of great works from the past”.<sup>18</sup>

Figure 2



Playbill for Beethoven’s musical Akademie at the Burgtheater on April 2, 800 Beethoven Haus Bonn<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Weber, William. “The History of Musical Canon.” *Rethinking Music*, edited by Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 236-335. *Oxford Academic*, 31 Oct. 2023, Abstract.

<sup>17</sup> Buzard, Katherine. “The Evolution of the Orchestra: A Brief History.” *WFMT*, 12 Feb. 2025.

<sup>18</sup> Weber, 2023, Abstract.

<sup>19</sup> Beethoven Haus Bonn. “Theaterzettel für Beethovens musikalische Akademie im Burgtheater

Concert programs often included a mixture of classical genres: instrumental concertos and symphonies or even masses (sometimes in excerpts), interspersed with arias or scenes from operas and instrumental variations on popular tunes (sometimes improvised). These programs of these concerts were much longer than is customary today: Mozart's Akademie of March 1786<sup>20</sup> must have lasted over three hours, and Beethoven's Akademie of 1808 some four hours (Figure 2), which was "quite normal at the time".<sup>21</sup>

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the programs of the *Concerts Colonne* "presented five works of different genres – a classical symphony, an overture or programme music, a concerto, a vocal work, and another genre such as a serenade, march, or ballet music"<sup>22</sup>. The orchestra founded in Paris in 1873 by conductor Edouard Colonne, subsequently known as the *Concerts Colonne* provides an interesting example in orchestra management. In a detailed study of the success of the *Concerts Colonne*, Jann Pasler analyzes the marketing strategies used to create a broad audience and ensure growth by flexibly reacting to audience preferences and to changes in the music market, which led to financial success. The concerts attracted audiences in increasing numbers both by the high professional level of performing and by their programming. Colonne's most important strategy in the 1870s was to repeat a work in response to audience demand, regularly performing successful works or performing a large popular work on consecutive Sundays until ticket sales drop off.

As recently as 2022, Travis Newton pointed to the fact that the repertoire of the traditional symphony concerts in America "has not changed much since the first professional American orchestra concerts in the mid-1800s – a concert featuring multiple works, largely written by white male (now mostly deceased) European or Russian composers, roughly two hours in length including an intermission."<sup>23</sup> A survey of the repertoire for classical concerts of the 2014-15 season of 21 major orchestras in the USA published interesting statistics: "Those orchestras will perform 1,000 different pieces by 286 different composers for a total of almost 4,600 times. The average year of composition

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am 2. April 1800." [Playbill for Beethoven's musical Akademie at the Burgtheater on April 2, 1800] *Beethoven Haus Bonn*.

<sup>20</sup> Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus. *The Letters of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1769-1791)*. Vol. 2, translated by Lady Wallace, Hurd and Houghton, n.d., p. 178-179.

<sup>21</sup> Pullinger, Mark. "Too Much of a Good Thing? Beethoven's 1808 Akademie in Vienna." *Bachtrack*, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Pasler, Jann. "Building a Public for Orchestral Music." *Le Concert et Son Public* [The concert and its audience], edited by H. E. Bödeker et al., Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2002, pp. 209-40.

<sup>23</sup> Newton, Trevis. *Orchestra Management Handbook: Building Relationships in Turbulent Times*. Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 86.

for the pieces is 1886, and only 9.5% were written after the start of the new millennium. [...] One out of eight performances feature pieces by Beethoven (317 performances) or Mozart (313 performances). John Adams is the most performed living composer (35 performances). Around 11% of the compositions are from composers who are still living”.<sup>24</sup> A statistics of almost 20,000 performances listed on *Bachtrack* in 2018 revealed that the most performed composers were 1. Beethoven 2. Mozart 3. Bernstein 4. Bach 5. Brahms 6. Schubert 7. Tchaikovsky 8. Debussy 9. Schumann 10. Handel (it is to be noted that their anniversaries moved Debussy up from rank 16 in 2016 and Bernstein up from rank 43 in 2016).<sup>25</sup>

To design a product that balances the mission of the orchestra (to deliver a performance at high-level performance) with the needs of the actual and potential customers, the orchestra needs – according to David Snead (former marketing director of the New York Philharmonic) – to find “the points of intersection between artistic ambitions and audience needs”<sup>26</sup>. Research shows that audiences, especially younger ones, are often uncomfortable with the traditional format of the symphony concert<sup>27</sup>. Researchers and professionals in the field emphasize that it is not the classical music itself that puts off some concertgoers, but the way it is presented. As Jean-Pierre Rousseau, director general of the *Orchestre philharmonique de Liège*, expressed it: „C’est la musique classique telle que vous la présentez qui ne fait pas d’audience” (“It is the classical music as you present [emphasis added] it that is not attracting any audience.”)<sup>28</sup> *The Magic of Music Symphony Orchestra Initiative*, a practical study conducted with American orchestras over two decade (1996-2004) comes to the same conclusion “The problems of orchestras stem not from the music they play but from the delivery systems they employ.”<sup>29</sup> Joanne Scheff Bernstein, one of the world’s leading arts marketing authorities, sums it up as follows: “Especially since the turn of the twenty-first century, audience needs and preferences have changed significantly. There is much debate as to whether the art presented on our stages is the source of changing ticket purchasing

<sup>24</sup> *International Musician*. “Baltimore Runs the Orchestra Numbers.” 2014.

<sup>25</sup> *Bachtrack*. “Classical Music in 2018: The Year in Statistics.” *Bachtrack*, 2019

<sup>26</sup> Snead, David, and Kate Prescott. *Effective Branding: The Evolution of the New York Philharmonic Brand*. 2010, p. 143.

<sup>27</sup> Kolb, Bonita M. “You Call This Fun? Reactions of Young First-Time Attendees to a Classical Concert.” *MEIEA Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2000, pp. 13-28.

<sup>28</sup> Seys, Pascale, editor. *Access - Quel Publics Pour La Musique Classique? Colloque International 6-9 Juin 2002* [Access - What Audiences for Classical Music? International Colloquium 6-9 June 2002]. Mardaga, 2003, p. 160.

<sup>29</sup> Wolf, Thomas. *The Search for Shining Eyes: Audiences, Leadership and Change in the Symphony Orchestra Field*. The Knight Foundation, 2006, p. 6.

behavior or whether people are responding differently to how the art is packaged and communicated to its publics.”<sup>30</sup> This prompts many orchestras to offer what is called “alternative concert format”. Concerts in non-traditional formats are particularly successful in attracting new audiences and are gaining in popularity.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Added verbal communication***

Adding verbal communication to the non-verbal communication provided by music is a strategy worthy of the attention of symphony orchestras. Some orchestras include talking from the stage during the concert by the conductor or a member of the orchestra, greeting the audience and giving a brief introduction to the following piece of music.<sup>32</sup> Program notes and pre-concert talks as elements of the “product” enhance the audience’s enjoyment of the works on the concert program by assisting with better understanding the music. It is important to adapt the content and language used, as research shows that “many in the audience want help becoming better listeners, but aren’t getting the help they want from program notes and pre-concert lectures that are seen as overly erudite.”<sup>33</sup>

**Program notes** have been an addition to concerts for more than two centuries. They became a fixture in Victorian England, when “certain musician-writers found success in providing some printed background and analysis of the programs” for the audiences searching “entertainment and enlightenment” in concert halls.<sup>34</sup> For his performances during the 1900-1901 season in London, 25-year-old pianist Donald Torvey, who went on to become a famous musicologist, wrote program notes with text and musical examples, which he had published “on soft, rough paper that turns noiselessly”<sup>35</sup>. Torvey also wrote notes for the concerts of the Reid Symphony Orchestra, which he

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<sup>30</sup> Bernstein, Joanne Scheff. *Arts Marketing Insights. The Dynamics of Building and Retaining Performing Arts Audiences*. John Wiley & Sons 2007, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Brown, Alan, and Rebecca Ratzkin. “New World Symphony: Summary Report: 2010-2013 Concert Format Assessment.” WolfBrown, 2013.  
<https://resonancias.uc.cl/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2014/09/nws-final-assessment-report-on-new-concert-formats.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Brown, Alan. *Smart Concerts: Orchestras in the Age of Edutainment*. Knight Foundation, 2004, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> Vittes, Laurence. “The Essays of Donald Tovey Still Inform Musicologists 150 Years after His Birth.” *Strings Magazine*, May-June 2025.

<sup>35</sup> Vittes, Laurence. “Orchestras and Competitions Rethink the Printed Program.” *Strings Magazine*, Jan.-Feb. 2023.



founded in 1914 as professor of music at the University of Edinburgh. These notes were published as *Essays in Musical Analysis* (6 volumes 1935 – 1939). Torvey's texts set the standard for this type of analytical explanatory program notes for classical concerts.<sup>36</sup>

Today, program notes are not explicitly directed to the connoisseur. They do not include musical examples, and the musical analysis is much shorter and less technical. They include more background information about the composer and the genesis of his work. Audrey Bergauer, the successful CEO of the California Symphony, urges orchestras to “tell stories with the program notes”<sup>37</sup>. Program notes also provide information about the performers, not only the conductor and the soloist but often with a complete list of the orchestra members. Donor information and promotion for upcoming concerts of the orchestra are also included.

Program notes help audiences to connect with the music; they contribute to the transformation of the concert from a passive experience into an educational and emotional journey. In the words of Berlin Philharmonic's head of editorial Tobias Möller “they contribute to an intense concert experience by giving the context of a concert and how the composers and musicians reflect our own lives.”<sup>38</sup>

In the digital age, many orchestras post their program notes on the website of the orchestra ahead of the concert. This not only allows the concertgoer to prepare for the concert but is also an opportunity for the orchestra to widen the information. Having only digital program notes brings along significant cost savings over printed programs, the ability to reduce paper use and eliminate waste, and the ease of announcing last-minute changes. Many orchestras, however, still use both digital and printed program notes, with Möller sharing the wide-spread view that printed programs are still relevant “as part of our overall communications.”<sup>39</sup>

Since the early 2000s, some orchestras worked together with IT firms for the development of digital tools, offering program notes to be used during the concert in real time with the music. An early example was the *Concert Companion* (“CoCo”), developed with the Kansas Symphony, a hand-held PDA (personal digital assistant) device on which “during the concert the users receive real-time interpretive text synchronized with the music”<sup>40</sup> The device was tested by several top orchestras in the USA and received wide press

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<sup>36</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Sir Donald Francis Tovey”. Encyclopedia Britannica, 13 Jul. 2025.

<sup>37</sup> Bergauer, Audrey. *Run It Like a Business*. BenBella Books, 2024, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Vitte, 2023.

<sup>39</sup> Vitte, 2023.

<sup>40</sup> Brown, 2004, p. 14.

coverage. But soon PDA were mostly displaced by the highly capable smartphones, so the focus was moved to the development of apps. The magazine of the League of American Orchestras published in 2023 an overview of the way how orchestras and audiences deploy digital devices, aptly intitled “Smartphone Symphony”<sup>41</sup>. It reviews, Among others, some of the applications developed for use during the concert: *LiveApp*, developed by the Philadelphia Orchestra, *ConcertCue*, a web-based platform that feeds listeners information about pieces through a stream of text and images against a dark screen, developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and used by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the New World Symphony in Miami, *InsideGuide* developed by IT firm Instant Encore and used by several orchestras across the US. The use of the phone during the concerts has created controversy among concertgoers, even though app developers offer dark backgrounds to minimize distracting glare. The Winston-Salem Symphony (North Carolina) asks *InsideGuide* users to refrain from texting and tweeting during the concert, so as not to distract neighboring members of the audience. “Some 40 percent of *InsideGuide* users have dropped printed programs entirely, while others simultaneously offer printed books or print-at-home PDFs.”<sup>42</sup>

Whether printed or digital, program notes remain an important part of the “product” symphony concert. They are more than a concert companion, because well written and designed program notes can be powerful marketing tools. They prove the expertise of the curators and the musicians, enforcing the branding of the orchestra, and can shape audience perception, deepen engagement, and extend the concert’s impact beyond the performance itself.

**Pre-concert** talks fulfill a similar role as program notes. The talks are free for ticketholders and are given between 45 minutes and an hour before the beginning of the concert in the concert hall itself, in a foyer, or in an adjacent facility. In 20 to 30 minutes, scholars or performing musicians, give insights into the works to be heard in the concert, sometimes staged as an informal talk with a host. Some musical themes may be illustrated on an electric keyboard or with recorded music examples. The personal touch brought by the speaker adds a human dimension to this informative introduction to the music. “Listeners who attended pre-concert talks [...] indicated an increased level of comfort as an audience member and a desire to attend future musical events as a result of the experience.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Wise, Brian. “Smartphone Symphony.” *Harmony*, 14 Aug. 2023

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Single, Nancy. *An Arts Outreach/Audience Development Program for Schools of Music in Higher Education*. 1991. Ohio State University, PhD dissertation, quoted in Henry, Michele L., and Laurel E. Zeiss. “Musicians as Authors: Teaching the Art of Writing Program Notes.” *College Music Symposium*, vol. 44, 2004, pp. 121-32. JSTOR, p. 121.

**Alternative concert formats** will be explored further in a subsequent study to be published in this journal.

## Conclusion

Symphony orchestras, even while being nonprofit organizations committed to high artistic quality, operate in the market economy, and need professional marketing. Marketing theories are applied taking into account the characteristics of orchestras. Live concerts played by orchestras to their paying audience are an economic offering. Within the frame of the 4 Ps marketing mix theory, they are the most important element of the “product”, but orchestras need to consider not only the concert itself and its repertoire, but also the elements of the augment program, particularly those adding verbal communication. To retain their public and attract new audiences, symphony orchestras need research, creativity and courage for change.

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