



PETER DOBRIN

CLASSICAL
MUSIC

WRTI-FM as music promoter

The Temple station is now highlighting live performances of local ensembles.

One recent frosty morning, WRTI-FM (90.1) was raising the curtain on the day with a Beethoven overture, a Brahms' Academic Festival Overture. Here was the station doing what it has done for years: keeping listeners warm with old chestnuts. But a lot has changed at WRTI, the Temple University-owned station with a twin jazz-classical identity, and more change is on the way.

Among recent moves on the classical front: The station has hired Debra Lew Harder, who has been host and producer of *Saturday Morning Classical Coffeehouse*, as a classical midday host. In a departure that may strike purists as heretical, the station has started playing single movements from larger pieces on a fairly regular basis.

And in perhaps its most significant bit of evolution, WRTI has taken on a heavy schedule of performances aired live from its studios in North Philadelphia. The broadcasts reinforce a shift in the station's mission that has been underway for years, away from simply playing CDs and toward promoting local music groups and presenters to a concentrated listenership.

Imani Winds recently previewed the quintet's Philadelphia Chamber Music Society concert with a visit to the WRTI studio for a performance and interview, as did Astral Artists laureate cellist Christine Lamprea and pianist Navah Perlman in advance of a Haverford College appearance. The shows are available on demand on the WRTI website.

What's in it for the station's owner?

"Temple's mission is to provide a great education," said university spokesperson Ray Betzner. "One of the great opportunities with WRTI is to provide news, classical music, and jazz, and those are parts of a well-rounded life."

The evolution from being just a radio station to chief promoter of classical music in the city opens up wider funding possibilities. Bill Johnson, WRTI's general manager, refers to the enterprise as not merely a media outlet, but a "cultural institution whose roots are in radio." (Full disclosure: The Inquirer partnered with WRTI to cover the Philadelphia Orchestra's 2018 overseas tour.)

Radio, in fact, may have no choice but to evolve. We



Bill Johnson, WRTI-FM general manager.

live with instant access and bottomless supply. YouTube, Spotify, SiriusXM, Pandora — the list of musical "content providers" is endless. And yet, the need for curation has never been more acute. It feels liberating in our exhausting era of profli-gate choice to let someone else make the decisions.

The power of this relationship — a strange degree of intimacy with a voice you've never seen or met — hit home for me late one night in December. Friends over for dinner had just left after an evening of bleak talk about politics and ailing family members.

Turning to the cleaning up, I switched on *Classical Through the Night*, the national show carried by WRTI's HD-2 service. Mendelssohn's incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was on, and the music, the surprise of it, arrived like a rush of humanity in a harsh world.

It was music I had, of course, heard a thousand times — but had I? The familiar score was reworked, patched together in a different way with new material, and beautiful. It turned out to be Erich Wolfgang Korn-gold's arrangement of the score for the 1935 Max Reinhardt film.

The meaning of it continued to ripple in my mind for days afterward. A late-night accidental encounter became something bigger and more enduring than passive listening.

There is tremendous value to having someone else tip you off to composers and pieces you'd have never known had you been left to your own devices. That is partly the case for playing



Production assistant Paul Marchesani runs the soundboard as cellist Christine Lamprea and pianist Navah Perlman rehearse before a live performance in WRTI's studios at Temple University. TIM TAI / Staff Photographer

single movements. If you loved the explosive first movement of Nielsen's *Symphony No. 3*, you might seek out the rest of it.

On WRTI, Mozart is the composer who shows up most frequently, according to the station's own analysis of one recently sampled week. After that, in no particular order, come Vivaldi, Beethoven, Dvorak, Chopin, and Bach. The Rossini string sonatas are getting a good workout these days.

But that's just the popularity list for WRTI's daytime classical programming. At night, jazz takes over the airwaves, and classical moves to HD-2.

There you'll find *Classical Through the Night*, with an eclectic mix that on one recent stretch of the wee hours included an anonymous 14th-century work at 2:54 a.m., a 19th-century film music to *The Leopard* led by Riccardo Muti at 4:34 a.m., and Stravinsky's *Suite italienne* an hour before daybreak. (No, I didn't stay up listening, but I peeked at the programming guide).

Other shows on HD-2, such as *Exploring Music* and *Collector's Corner*, are wonderfully revealing of artists and repertoire you never heard of, had only heard of but never knew, and thought you knew but really

didn't. Broadcasts on successive nights from orchestras of Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, and Pittsburgh keep you up to date on the relative quality and characteristics of those ensembles.

The biggest part of the station's classical listenership, though, is tuning in during the day, and it's that core experience that the station is steering toward being more supportive and reflective of the live performing arts community.

Yes, you can summon BBC Radio 3 and hear Shostakovich and Philip Glass

with a tap of the touchpad. But a local focus differentiates WRTI.

Sometimes now, the station will air unpublished recorded performances by the Philadelphia Orchestra and other groups. Live-from-studio classical and jazz broadcasts are averaging four per week, says Johnson.

As the attention bandwidth of most media consumers becomes more splintered, and as arts and culture struggles to maintain a direct line of communication with its base, WRTI's direction appears to be filling the right need at the right time.

"We are certainly getting a great public response, and the demand is increasing for us to do more," Johnson says. "More organizations and artists are reaching out to us than ever before, asking how they can be a partner."

The goal, he says, is to increase partnerships with local groups to the point that the region's artists and presenters are fully woven into the station's identity.

"That should be part of our ongoing sound."

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THE PHILADELPHIANS ON THE AIR

1-3 p.m. Sunday on WRTI-FM (90.1): The Philadelphia Orchestra performs Leonard Bernstein's *Symphony No. 3* ("Kaddish"), featuring soprano **Nadine Sierra** and narrator **Charlotte Blake Alston**. Also on the program is Rossini's *Charlot Mater* with the Philadelphia Symphonic Choir and Philadelphia Boys Choir. **Yannick Nézet-Séguin** conducts.

7
DAYS
Plan your week with this guide to the region's entertainment highlights.
By BethanyAo
SUNDAY
Anderson .Paak & the Free Nationals The California rapper came to prominence with contributions to Dr. Dre's *Compton* album. On this tour stop, he's promoting last year's rock-solid *Oxnard*.
8 p.m., the Fillmore, 29 E. Allen St., \$92 for a verified resale ticket, 215-309-0150, thefillmorephilly.com
MONDAY
Martha Graham Cracker Cabaret Expect plenty of

TUESDAY
Wanda Sykes She may not want to admit it to the world, but the Emmy-winning comedian is a part-time Media resident — she was even spotted voting there in November. This week, she returns for a more
See 7 DAYS on H9

laughs, live music, and fake eyelashes at this performance by Dito van Reigersberg's alter ego.
7 to 9:30 p.m., L'Etage, 624 S. Sixth St., \$20 in advance, \$30 on the day of show, 21+, 215-592-0656, facebook.com/MarthaGrahamCracker

THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY
Book by Marsha Norman | Music & Lyrics by James Robert Brown
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