

ON THE AIR

by Amy Russell



David Hartman warms up for the mic



Amy Russell



Peter Bombal

“Welcome to Meymandi Concert Hall and the North Carolina Symphony – in concert. I’m David Hartman.”

While I hate to dispel the myth, if it exists, David Hartman’s signature opening line is actually a little white lie. He isn’t broadcasting live from the concert hall, although we do hope to work some radio magic to make it come across that way. In fact, the North Carolina Symphony broadcast usually doesn’t hit the air waves until a few weeks or even months after the concert.

There are many people involved in creating each North Carolina Symphony radio show. I’m the Associate Producer for the series and I’ll give you a backstage pass and walk you through the whole process that leads up to a broadcast, from the downbeat of the dress rehearsal all the way to, “...and I’m David Hartman. Make it a good evening.”

The Interviews

The interview process really begins at the start of each Classical series dress rehearsal. Our radio host and broadcaster extraordinaire, David Hartman, settles into a seat (usually in a box or the choir loft) to hear the music he’ll discuss later with that week’s conductor and soloist. At about the same time, our sound engineer Dwight Robinett sets up his gear backstage and by the dressing rooms, preparing to record the concerts and interviews. Dwight is a true Renaissance man – he is not only our engineer, but also our Assistant Principal Trombone.*

At the end of the rehearsal, there is a flurry of activity on stage with orchestra musicians packing up their instruments and asking last-minute questions of the conductor. David is usually in that mix, too, introducing himself to the soloist and saying hellos to orchestra players. Then, we – David, myself, the conductor and the soloist – make our way to a dressing room, one level down, where our stage crew has developed an ingenious system of ropes, clips and hi-tech cutting-edge acoustic panels (okay, they’re really just moving blankets, but they do the trick!) to transform the room into a suitable recording environment.

David takes his seat in the dressing room, directly across from the first interviewee, usually our soloist for the week. He begins with some pre-taping chatter: tell me about your family, where are you from, have you worked with this conductor before, etc. This helps Dwight to set the audio levels and also loosens up the guest for a relaxed conversation. David has an ebullient personality and

natural curiosity about everything, and it is a testament to his years at the top of the business that he can so quickly make a connection with anyone and everyone. Once Dwight gives the okay, David launches into the interview, covering the artist’s career, the week’s rehearsals, the repertoire and so on. Dwight and I sit just outside, in the hallway, and listen in on headphones to monitor sound quality. After about fifteen minutes, David thanks the guest, who then usually heads back to the hotel for some rest before that night’s concert, or up to the stage to do a little private practice.

The interview with the conductor, usually with Grant Llewellyn, who has been patiently (and quietly) waiting in an adjoining dressing room, is next. We launched our broadcast series in Grant’s first season, 2004-2005, so by this point, David and Grant have spent hours and hours together in the interview setting and they have an easy and joyful way of talking about music, just like old friends.

After the conductor's interview, Dwight gives me a CD of the audio files, and we all shake hands and head our separate ways; for me, that means back to the Symphony offices to begin work on the podcast which will be your first chance to hear these great conversations. You can download the podcasts on our website (www.ncsymphony.org).

The Podcast

Twenty minutes later and I'm back at my desk, booting up Adobe Audition, our digital editing software that I'll use to create the podcast. Listening to the podcast is a great way to get the inside scoop on the week's rehearsals, the personality of the guest artists and their unique perspective on the repertoire. I don't edit very much out of the podcast interviews, so those are usually longer and a bit more colorful than the versions that end up in the final radio broadcast. I might snip a few "um"s and "er"s and a throat clearing here and there, but that's the extent of the workload before the interviews are posted on the website. Look for them around 4pm on the Thursday before every Classical series concert.

The Music

The next evening, Dwight is backstage listening through his headphones as the stage fills with musicians, the hall fills with patrons and the conductor takes the stage. He tapes the entire evening, including almost an hour's worth of audience noise – I'll use that ambience later to fill in behind David's voiceover during the broadcast. Next time you are in Meymandi Concert Hall at around 7:45pm on a Classical concert night, look up above the stage and you will see a few small black microphones stealthily hung from the ceiling. You're going to be on the radio!

Immediately after Saturday's performance, Dwight produces a couple of CDs to pass on to the members of our Artistic Advisory Committee. This is a group of orchestra musicians who have been elected by their peers to consult with the Music Director regarding artistic matters, such as exactly which recordings make it into the radio broadcast. Dwight drops off another set of recordings of the concerts at the office a day or two later and I load them onto my PC and send the files to our guest artist for approval and comments.

Fourth Horn, Rachel Niketopoulos is the current Chair of the Artistic Advisory Committee and she gets feedback from the rest of that group after they have reviewed the

recordings. I receive their final editing notes a few weeks before each broadcast. Sometimes their response is simply, "Use the first movement of the Brahms from Friday and the rest from Saturday." But, occasionally it is more complicated, like, "Take measures 4 through 38 from Friday in the second movement. Take out the audience cough during the violin solo at five minutes thirteen seconds in the first movement," and so on. The artist and conductor contact me at about the same time with their preferences. All is taken into account and the editing is completed.

The Script

I love writing these scripts. I get to spend a few hours a week pretending I am back in college, among the stacks and practice rooms in Hill Hall. (I spent many happy days earning my music degree at UNC-Chapel Hill.) The idea behind each script is to give structure to the broadcast – announcing the program, providing what we call intros and outros for each piece of music, and giving biographical information on the conductor and soloist. The script is also our chance to give the audience some perspective on why the music is important and why we chose the pieces we did. I usually begin with facts about the composer's life, when the piece was written and why, critical reactions, and the composer's influence or place in the evolution of orchestral music. If there is a strong programmatic link between the works, I'll talk about that, too, which lets listeners in on the conductor's thinking behind programming each concert. I use many sources when researching, including our program notes by Dr. Richard Rodda, the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, judicious use of Wikipedia and a number of trusty tomes like Michael Steinberg's *The Concerto*, *The Symphony*, and *Choral Masterworks* and Harold C. Schonberg's *Lives of the Great Composers*.

There is another trick to writing these scripts: they have to sound like David Hartman. While he is the first to say that he is not a musical scholar, he does have extensive experience singing in choirs and musical theatre productions as well as lifelong and deep respect for the art form. I've got to strike that balance in the words I craft for him. David is a great writer himself and has taught me so much about writing for radio. My first scripts for him were dense and academic and, well, dull, but I am proud to say that I think I have graduated from the Hartman School of Broadcasting with flying colors, and now we work together

like a well-oiled machine. (It probably helps that I shut my office door and read the scripts aloud in my best David Hartman voice before I ever send them his way. I can do a decent imitation of his cadence and ad-libs – totally out of respect for the man, of course!)

The Voiceover

Once I finish the script, I spend some time with the Symphony's VP for Artistic Operations and General Manager Scott Freck, reading through it and making any necessary changes. Scott is also the Executive Producer of the radio broadcast series. Then I email the script to David on the Friday afternoon before our voiceover recording session the following Monday. On that Monday morning, David and I meet in the conference room at WUNC-FM in Durham to talk through the script and make any changes that he recommends.

Next, we head into the studio to meet up with WUNC-FM's Technical Production Supervisor Peter Bombar. David takes his seat in the recording booth, and on the other side of the glass, I'm seated behind Peter, in the production booth. David puts on his headphones and does a test read of the first paragraph while Peter checks the levels. Peter gives us the go-ahead and David begins to read the script. While David is reading, I watch the time code on the recording and list it, along with my notes, next to the start of each take on my script. That way, I will be able to quickly find the bits of the recording I want to use when I start to build the show later. It usually takes us about forty-five minutes to record the script, with stops and starts to correct pronunciation and to get different takes in different moods – I produce the session by speaking to David using an intercom system piped right into his headphones. Those forty-five minutes also usually include a few breaks for telling stories, giving our renditions of scenes from Mel Brooks movies and general joking around. We keep it pretty light-hearted and all of the fun is recorded – I could make a great blooper reel one day!

Once we feel we've got a great take of each bit of the script, David comes into the booth to wait with us as the session is burned onto a CD. We all chat, catching up on family, work, Peter's motorcycle business, David's next adventure in broadcasting. (He's always hosting panels of astronauts or Nobel Prize winners somewhere, poor guy.) Once the CD is ready, I have the final piece of the puzzle that I need to create our broadcast.

The Build

Later that week, I take all of the audio material we've gathered – the interviews, the music, the voiceover – edit each individual piece and then put it all together. The best comparison to building the broadcast that I can think of is quilt-making. Each sound file is like one patch for the quilt, and they all get stitched together into what Adobe Audition calls a multi-track session. You add each piece into the session, move it around to perfect the timing and adjust the volume, either as a whole or fading in and out. I've just made it sound much simpler than it is – the whole process takes hours to complete. I create two sessions: one for the first half of the program and another for the second half, a.k.a. Reel One and Reel Two.

Once I feel like the show is just how I want it, I take it to Scott and we listen through it together to do any final tweaking. After that, I mix the two reels down into one audio file each – from that patchwork stage into something that is more like one solid piece of cloth. I burn those files onto CDs and send them to WUNC-FM's Operations Manager and Producer Patty Painter-Wakefield in Chapel Hill.

The Broadcast

We aim for a total broadcast length of one hour and fifty-eight minutes. Of course, it's hard to be that precise every time, so if we come up a little short I'll suggest a complementary commercial recording for Patty to throw in after our program airs. For example, one recent broadcast included the orchestra performing Liszt's Mephisto Waltz. That piece is heard more often in performance on solo piano, so I suggested to Patty that she air pianist Gabriela Montero's recording of the same work right after our show to fill out the time slot.

So, there you have it: all of our secrets revealed. Now that you are in-the-know, please set your dial to 91.5 WUNC-FM at 8pm on the last Monday of every month. Whether you are driving on I-40, eating dinner at your kitchen table or jogging on the greenway, we'll transport you over the airwaves and right into Meymandi Concert Hall, where you can relive a great performance you heard in person or you can catch up on one that you may have missed.



*Editor's note: Dwight retires at the end of the 2009-2010 season after 35 years as the orchestra's Assistant Principal Trombone.

Thanks for listening!

I want to acknowledge all of the other brilliant people who take part in making these broadcasts happen. Allyn Love, our Director of Operations, is a music history whiz and writes and edits some of our broadcasts. When David Hartman is unavailable, we often turn to Catherine Brand or David Brower from the WUNC-FM staff to fill in as interviewers. We also work with engineers Robin Copley, David Wright and Al Wodarski when recording our voice-over sessions. Rachel Niketopoulos is joined on the Artistic Advisory Committee by Karen Galvin and Mary Boone. And, of course, we couldn't bring these great broadcasts without our sponsor Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina.

Amy Russell

Director of Artistic Programs and Partnerships



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