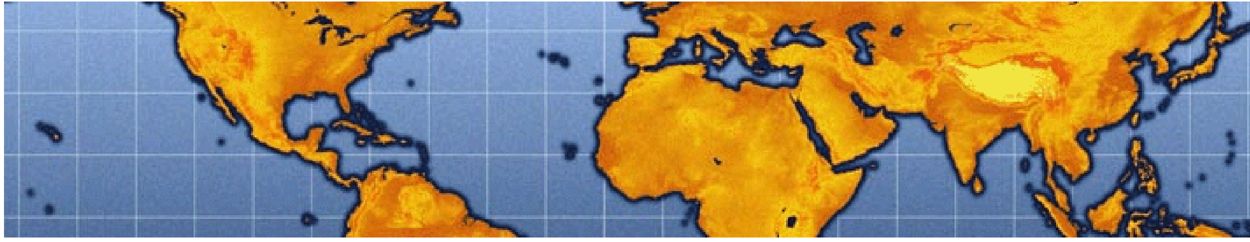

An Interview with

Robert Levine
Principal Violist of the Milwaukee Symphony

on
Building, Broadening, and Energizing Audiences for the Musical Arts

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Background on Robert Levine

Robert Levine has been the Principal Violist of the Milwaukee Symphony since September 1987. Before coming to Milwaukee Mr. Levine had been a member of the Orford String Quartet, Quartet-in-Residence at the University of Toronto, with whom he toured extensively throughout Canada, the United States, and South America. Prior to joining the Orford Quartet, Mr. Levine had served as Principal Violist of The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra for six years. He has also performed with the San Francisco Symphony, the London Symphony of Canada, and the Oklahoma City Symphony.

He has performed as soloist with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Oklahoma City Symphony, the London Symphony of Canada, the Midsummer Mozart Festival (San Francisco), and numerous community orchestras in Northern California and Minnesota. He has also been featured on American Public Radio's nationally broadcast show "St. Paul Sunday Morning" on several occasions.

Mr. Levine has been an active chamber musician, having performed at the Festival Rolandseck in Germany, the Grand Teton Music Festival, the Palm Beach Festival, the "Strings in the Mountains" Festival in Colorado, and numerous concerts in the Twin Cities and Milwaukee. He has also been active in the field of new music, having commissioned and premiered works for viola and orchestra from Minnesota composers Janika Vandervelde and Libby Larsen.

Mr. Levine was chairman of the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians from 1996 to 2002 and currently serves as President of the Milwaukee Musicians Association, Local 8 of the American Federation of Musicians. He has written extensively about issues concerning orchestra musicians for publications of ICSOM, the AFM, the Symphony Orchestra Institute, and the American Symphony Orchestra League.

Mr. Levine attended Stanford University and the Institute for Advanced Musical Studies in Switzerland. His primary teachers were Aaron Sten and Pamela Goldsmith. He also studied with Paul Doctor, Walter Trampler, Bruno Giuranna, and David Abel.

This interview was conducted by Kristin Cobble of GBN, by phone from Emeryville, CA.

GBN: Why don't you tell me a little bit about your background?

Levine: I grew up in California and I come from an academic family. I worked for IBM as a programmer when I was in high school. In fact, two of the people I worked with were very instrumental in the original Macintosh.

I didn't really intend to become a musician. I became a labor activist fairly early on, partly because I was built that way and partly because the issues were interesting and challenging.

A lot of what I've done has been informed by some of the experiences I had growing up. When I was in high school I was doing tele-computing. I was working on a terminal in Palo Alto, but talking to a computer in Yorktown in New York. The modem was a wooden box and you called up on the phone and when you got a tone in the handset, you'd jam the handset into the box and then close the door. It was strictly an acoustic coupling. I've watched the development of computing from very early in the game and it has been truly *amazing* to watch!

I became interested in media issues when I became part of the orchestra business. Then, when I became chair of ICSOM (International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians), one of the things we did was strive to represent the interests of the big orchestras. We represent the full-time American symphony musicians and we supplied most of the representation for the symphonic media negotiations that the federation would hold, whether it was with the record industry, the symphonic industry, or with public radio.

Although I wasn't chair of the media committee, my predecessor was. During 1997-1998 we began an Internet negotiation. We knew we didn't know very much about the Internet but nobody did at that time. The first step was to have a centrally joined investigation with management and musicians, working with the manager's media committee (mostly big orchestras) the AFM, and some of the other symphonic player conferences such as the smaller orchestras and the Canadians. We spent a number of meetings over a number of months meeting with various people. We met with people in the intellectual property rights area; we met with publishers; we met with technology people. We heard some pretty wild schemes.

We really wanted to try to do it right and we recognized that nobody really knew very much about this sort of thing. The agreement had to be one that allowed for experimentation, because we didn't know enough to define the product. Ultimately, I think this was the smartest thing we did. In the end, by 2000, we came up with an Internet agreement that covered symphonic products. It got a lot of press and was even featured on the front page in the Business Section of the New York Times.

It was a very unusual agreement, because, although it was a national, collective bargaining agreement, it had a lot of local control and was also deliberately tilted towards favoring the institutions and the musicians, allowing them to retain control of

the product. Both management and musicians felt they had been so burned by the record companies over the years that we simply didn't want to get into the business of actually making product available to record companies or other third parties unless they paid a ton of money for it. Our history and our archives became somebody else's property, and they didn't use it in our interests. If they decided they didn't want to release it, it didn't get released. We didn't see much benefit from that sort of arrangement. So the agreement was tilted towards local control and towards being very flexible in terms of experimentation. It had a real bias towards self-produced material. Whether or not we actually controlled the technical end of things, we still retained the ownership and the ultimate control of the product.

In Milwaukee, we took material that had never been released, except over radio, and made it commercially available for downloading. No one had ever done that over the Internet. It was less a result of months of vision and working together, than an opportunity that dropped into our laps. We were smart enough, and knowledgeable enough, to recognize it for what it was and jump on it. It is not very often an orchestra like mine can do something for the first time. We're not going to make the first record; we're not going to make the first CD; we're not going to make the first video. But there is real value in having a national reputation as being innovative. More importantly, there is value in terms of generating a positive, local reputation with the funders and the audience.

We were able to admit that we had big deficits but we also showed that we were able to achieve something fantastic, even in a time of crisis. We were able to do something that nobody else had done yet. Not Boston, not New York, not San Francisco, but us. It certainly did get a lot of attention!

GBN: Are you saying that you all were financially struggling and because you did this you were able to save yourselves?

Levine: Institutions have images in communities, especially in conservative ones. They're hard to change. My thought was that this is something we could use to begin to change our image.

Management is trying to do that in other ways by being fiscally responsible and meeting their commitments, but I saw an opportunity for us to really enhance that. You know, you'd have to talk to management to see whether they're actually having any success in selling the message, but it definitely did get a lot of play locally and I think we have been recognized as innovative, which was the goal of being the first to do it.

GBN: Has it only gotten a lot of play locally or has it also been able to cause you all to get attention from other locales?

Levine: We've definitely gotten some attention from elsewhere. There was an article in the "Wall Street Journal" that came recently was published. A couple of the

stereophile magazines in San Francisco picked up the story. The “Chicago Tribune” picked it up. It wasn’t blanketing things, but it was an amazing achievement for the Milwaukee Symphony to end up in the “Wall Street Journal.” I think that was a first.

GBN: You’re putting live recordings on iTunes, correct?

Levine: Yes. One of the reasons, which I think has not been emphasized enough, that we were able to do this is that as an institution we’ve had really a 30-year commitment to electronic media in some form. We’ve had a continuous national radio series for 30 years, which is almost unique, even among the big orchestras. This is something the MSO had worked really hard to protect.

If we didn’t have the depth to our archive, and if we hadn’t had that tradition of emphasizing media in some form, it couldn’t have happened.

GBN: So how is it working out for the symphony as a business, but also for all of you as the musicians? You talked about how it’s going to be a while before you know, but what do you know right now? What are you learning so far?

Levine: Well, the only sales figures we’ve had are really from the first two or three weeks. It looks like the sales – if they were CDs – would be considered respectable. They’re not, apparently, in the same range as the sales that the London Symphonies had, but that doesn’t really surprise me. I just heard from our iTunes – from our IODA guy – that apparently we sold a surprising number of materials on iTunes France. Go figure! We may become the Jerry Lewis of the symphonic field.

Another interesting thing is that that the material that we could sell on the CD is completely different from the material that people are going to buy on-line.

GBN: Can you explain that to me?

Levine: The only explanation I can think of – and it may not be the right one – is that the people finding music on iTunes are new listeners and they’re picking up music they recognize. Our three biggest sellers so far are the Beethoven fifth symphony,” “Night on Bald Mountain” and the Sierra piece. Why the Sierra piece, we don’t know, although I think that it’s a really good sign, because it was a piece that went up for commercial sale three weeks after the world premiere. I think we may have set a world record on getting a recording of a premiere performance available commercially.

GBN: Can you tell me more about the Sierra piece?

Levine: Roberto Sierra is a professor at Columbia. He’s a Puerto Rican composer. He’s actually quite successful. He was our composer in residence for a number of years. It’s his third symphony and we opened this season with the world premiere. We had already determined what was going to be in the first wave of

material released for downloading and a few days afterwards, we decided that the piece was really terrific and that we wanted to add it to the first wave. So it was part of the first release. And it was literally within three weeks of the world premiere.

One of the beautiful things about this is that you don't have to wait months to go off and press CDs. You've got the file. You do it. And it happened really, really, quickly!

Our music director, who conducted it, was in Seattle the week we were working on this project. We wondered how we were going to get him the disc so he could approve it. Well, I uploaded them from my Yahoo briefcase and told him where to find them. And he downloaded them onto his iPod in Seattle and was able to listen to them. We used the Internet for the whole internal approval process.

The LSO has found that their big seller was also something pretty conventional. The people that buy CDs generally have a bunch of copies of "Beethoven 5" already. They don't need another one. But if something interesting comes along like the big seller – apparently, for the LSO was their Berlioz opera, "Les Troyen" – they will buy it.

The simplest explanation is you've just got two very different audiences, very different levels of sophistication and they're looking for different experiences.

GBN: Is there advice that you would give to other musicians or orchestras who might be interested in creating their own on-line presence? What should their expectations be regarding who it will impact?

Levine: There are certainly things I could tell people about what the agreement should include and what they look like, but I think the advice I would most want to give, would be that they just need to start doing it, one way or the other.

Increasingly, our feeling internally is that the real impact of this is for orchestras like us, as opposed to orchestras like the LSO. I don't know that we've seen anything yet that would qualify as real money. And we didn't expect that to happen. That's not what it was about. I think the use of this stuff is more to tie our subscribers and our donors to us, and to support that core mission of playing concerts. This is not to say that we are now a media company, or that we're now going to make our money in media, because we're not. I suspect that the more that orchestras get into this sort of thing, the more the LSO is going to start being impacted. I suspect that the real economic impact on orchestras is going to be that it helps them do what they're already doing, not that it will provide a completely new revenue source.

GBN: How long have you all been doing this?

Levine: Just since October. We've got a 90-day exclusive with iTunes. After that expires, we hope to be on other stores. Ideally, when we start releasing more

material, there'll be some more buzz. Everything in orchestras happens slowly, including seeing results. I would have been shocked if we'd actually seen a kind of noticeable positive impact by now.

GBN: What are the major forces that you see shaping the classical music "business" today and tomorrow? What do you expect will remain the same and what do you think will be different a decade from now?

Levine: There are probably two schools of thought: One is that there's a lot of change going on, but eventually there will be kind of a constant demand for what we do. And the other one, which is really scary, is the notion that peoples' attention spans are just becoming so short that the idea of sitting in a concert hall for two hours is just not going to fly anymore.

I was at a meeting at the American Symphony Orchestra League on Tuesday was all about strategic planning and how orchestras can cope with change. There's no question in my mind that there are a lot of things we will be doing differently 20 years from now. But fundamentally what we do is play concerts. When you do a Beethoven symphony, you've got 90 people on stage playing Beethoven, and there's a bunch of people in the audience sitting there quietly listening to them. That's what we do. If there just isn't a demand for this sort of thing, we really can't change to meet any new demands. We can change how we present it; we can change how we look on stage; we can change how the conductor relates to the audience to some extent. There are a lot of things we could change, but the core experience is what it is and it's been that way for 200 years.

The good news is there's been a lot of change in 200 years and we're still here. The bad news is that this doesn't guarantee anything. Is this a change in the weather or a change in the climate? And it does feel to a lot of people like a change in the climate. I haven't made up my mind, in part because I've been in the business long enough that I've heard a lot of the rhetoric before. We're always hearing that things are bad or that things are getting worse. It's never been easy to run an orchestra. People look back and talk about the "golden days" and the "good old days", but they really weren't. It has always been tough. It's not getting easier, there's no question, and there do appear to be some trends that seem fundamentally against us.

There's an old English historian that said something once that I probably say too often, He said, "It's very hard to make predictions, especially about the future." It's true that we really can't know the future with any certainty, but this doesn't mean that we don't have to try to understand it. Nonetheless, it's comforting that there are limits to how much we can change. If we're irrelevant, maybe we should disappear. Yet, in many ways, you hear more classical music now than you ever did. You hear it on commercials. You hear it in movies. It's all there. It's just in a different form. But that doesn't mean it's necessarily going to help us survive.

GBN: What do you think your fellow musicians need to learn more about, to adapt to the new world of digital music, and what might they need to let go of?

Levine: We need to learn about the role of media in our lives as working musicians. Can we use it to support the core mission or is it simply another source of income?

The problem is that there are a lot of people in our business that remember when media work was simply another source of income and a fairly significant one at that. They remember the glory days when they were making a lot of recordings and a lot of money. I think it's hard for people to accept that things have changed. I think the debate we're faced with now revolves around the extent to which things have changed. Have we really moved from a model where we can demand tremendous amounts of money and refuse to generate media if we denied? If we not willing to change how we think about media, we could really be hurting ourselves in the long run. Our day job is the orchestra. The media has always been a sideline.

I think one of the reasons managements didn't see the Internet agreement as being an opportunity, was, even though they don't say this, don't talk this, but there's still kind of a passivity about media, that media is something that comes to us, not that we go out and figure out how to use on our own. There are very few institutions around that have been proactive about media. It's not generally a function of the media labor agreements and the fact that they cost too much to work, although sometimes it is. Mostly, it's just a mind set. And the Internet agreement was a perfect example. There was all this interest when these outside parties wanted to throw money at us. As soon as the money went away, nobody was thinking that we could continue to do the work on our own or how we could use it to help ourselves. Managements weren't thinking about it, much less the musicians. And I think when the managements do and did, they found interest from the musicians in the orchestras.

GBN: Are there additional thoughts that you have or additional ideas that you'd like to share?

Levine: I am really relieved that I don't run an orchestra, because I wouldn't know what to do. There are people in the field that have some good sense about marketing and they are developing some sense of what the product needs to look like. This is not quite the same thing as saying what the product needs to be, but rather what it needs to look like in order for it to be attractive.

I think it is harder now than it used to be, maybe because there are so many options; maybe because people have a higher standard of what to expect. I'm coming to believe that it may be that what we need to do is think differently about our expectations of revenue from tickets; think about going into smaller halls; think about having a much more intimate experience for the audience; think about having more musician involvement. I don't mean to imply that musicians should begin running the

marketing department, but that musicians should position themselves more like a chamber group. Berlin and Vienna follow this model. In Vienna, they play in a tiny hall and the audience sits right on top of them. They look like they're playing in quartets. They're very involved, and it is very compelling to see. This is a very different spectacle than the typical American experience. I think there has to be an internal culture change combined with a strong effort to making the audience physically closer and more involved in the performance.

If I have any thoughts for the future, it may be that, we're going to have to downsize our earned revenue expectations a bit and really think more about the quality of the experience and less about the number of people we provide it to.