



An Interview with

Marcia Alvar
Public Radio Program Directors Association

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

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About Marcia Alvar

Marcia Alvar is President of PRPD, an organization dedicated to the profession and craft of public radio programming. PRPD is a convener of people and ideas, decision making support around day-to-day decisions about programming, promotion, people management and more, and serves as an advocate and collective voice for its membership on key issues and concerns.

PRPD is a vital part of the public radio community with a membership that includes almost 200 stations as well as both national networks and independent producers. In the mid-1980s a group of public radio program directors started talking about the need for an organization that would help them, and all PDs, with their jobs. They wanted to improve the service they provided their listeners by honing their programming skills and professionalizing the role of PDs throughout the public radio system.

The mission of PRPD is to help public radio programmers provide a valuable service to listeners. PRPD exists to lead, train and provide resources to public radio program directors and other programming decision makers including station staff and program producers. PRPD accomplishes this mission by:

- Defining and advocating principles of quality public radio programming
- Training program decision makers on basic and advanced programming skills, and
- Building stronger connections among various facets of the public radio community

Marcia Alvar co-founded PRPD and served as its first national chair from 1987-1990. Ms. Alvar has worked as a Program Director at a variety of public radio stations including WBFO in Buffalo, NY, KTOO in Juneau, Alaska and KUOW in Seattle, WA. From 1979-1983, Ms. Alvar headed the Alaska Public Radio Network where she launched and anchored APRN's award winning daily news magazine Alaska News Nightly. She also managed the funding, design and construction of the APRN Satellite Interconnection Project which built an independent uplink into the public radio satellite system. Before joining PRPD as President in 1998, Ms. Alvar served as the producer for the Savvy Traveler, a nationally broadcast public radio program.

This interview was conducted by Kristin Cobble of GBN, by phone. The comments below are paraphrased highlights from the conversation, not direct quotes.

The comments below have been edited for clarity from a transcript of the interview. Some material has been condensed from the original for presentation here.

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Cobble: You are really considered an expert on how classical music competes for time and audience in the public radio venue. Can you tell me about some of your research?

Alvar: We're working on the sixth study right now in our Core Values Project. The project is about defining what core public radio listeners – people who like public radio better than anything else – value in our different formats and how they articulate that value. This articulation is being used to help us in the design and presentation of those formats.

We did a summit about public radio's most popular national programs to kick the project off in 2000. We did a local news study in 2001. We've done two classical studies and a jazz study. Our next study is looking at the value and values of localism in the hopes we can strengthen local service and better identify just what it is that local stations can do best to serve their communities.

The research is designed to help us find ways to talk about what we mean by words like "quality". We got started because we discovered that we really didn't have much of a vocabulary to talk about that. These terms are rarely defined and without that it's hard to find any sort of consensus about programming strategies.

Cobble: Public Radio's role as a presenter of music has definitely been shifting over the last two decades. We're walking into this meeting assuming that the audiences are smaller for classical music; that would be one example of the shift. And that news is taking up more and more time in public radio. I'd love to just hear your thoughts on what you see and why you think this is happening.

Alvar: This is where these conversations get tricky. Do we make that assumption because hours of classical music have been displaced by news programming or because audiences are actually listening to classical music less? Listening to public radio's classical music has actually been very stable – or flat if you will. There are examples of audience growth, but they are on the commercial side – most notably KDFC in San Francisco. I haven't seen data for Classic FM in the UK but from what I hear they are also a success story worth looking at.

One other thing that's happened – and I'm not sure if this is ever factored into these discussions – is that there have been new all-classical services developed both locally and nationally. So it hasn't been entirely one way, although there is a trend for dual format stations with a single FM frequency to go all news. The bulk of their listening was in the morning and afternoon drive news magazines, and as more and more news programming became available they added it because they felt that doing so allowed them, as a business, organization, and as a public service, to harness their resources in one direction.

I think of these format decisions as a kind of tidal change. The whole history of broadcasting is about the increasing specialization of formats. We saw it in television when television went from broadcast networks to cable. Pretty soon there's going to be a cable television channel on cheese for six mice! This is the tide of history.

When it comes to classical music, the real question is why listening has not grown like news listening has. Especially at a time when huge numbers of people are entering the age demographic most inclined to use and enjoy classical music. There is a lot of room for the development of classical music radio that better serves listeners!

Radio is a medium that has very, very specific strengths and very, very specific weaknesses. In the words of a cab driver in a San Francisco focus group, who I just absolutely fell in love with through the glass, “Radio is the broadest and most democratic portal into the music.” You don’t have to have a lot of money, you don’t have to buy a ticket to the symphony, and you don’t have to have a fancy CD player. Radio is the great, democratic, broad portal into the music.

There is a tremendous mismatch between the people who would love to hear this music and the way it is presented to them. If you envision radio as this broad portal, it conveys the idea that we are a spreader of the gospel for classical music, and that throwing the doors wide open means that we make the music as accessible to the people as we can, in the way they truly live their lives, not in the way we would wish them to live their lives or with an educational background in music that we would like them to have. It simply says: we are the greatest open space for you to encounter this music and learn to love it. In partnership with other people, presenters, artists, etcetera, we can create ways in which people who love the music can learn more about it. This does not mean we should conduct music education on the air. We can create partnerships with other institutions in the arts community and in the education community that will allow those people who want it to deepen their relationship with the music to do so.

KDFC in San Francisco has actually done a rather good job of that – they provide a lot of “deepening” opportunities using their website, events and other activities in the community. For example, they’ve got a foundation to help support music education in the schools. This is a partnership that is dying to happen if we want to make a difference in this culture. My parents met playing in an orchestra. My mother was an oboist, my father was a violinist; all of us played instruments. We would go to school, and we loved music class. I think of kids going to school today and it is just completely barren of this kind of experience. Whether or not kids are going to get out of sixth grade and dream of going to Juilliard or will listen to classical music for another 40 years, if we provide these experiences for them, they will have, at least, gotten a taste of it and a solid grounding in the musical arts at this age.

How can we galvanize this idea of re-introducing this experience so that it truly enriches children’s lives? If I could do anything, it would be to somehow make it possible for children to have the kind of experience in the arts that we had when we were children.

One thing that we have the capacity to do right now is to ask who we are presenting this music for. Is it for our peers and our pals in the music department and the musicologists, or is it also for people who may know nothing about it. The people that we talked with in our studies, they would often admit with embarrassment that they really didn’t know very much about the music it’s as if they were apologizing for their ignorance somehow. They felt that they should know more. But they don’t; they just liked the music. The music was more of a soundtrack in their life. They’re learning to appreciate good music and some of the other things in life like travel, and things that broaden you intellectually or culturally. Yet my feeling is that we so often demand more from these individuals– that this is not enough for us. We want them to know more and treat them as if they *should* know more. That’s the refrain that came through the Knight Foundation Study as well - the Knight Foundation study on classical music consumption was the largest quantitative study of arts presentation ever done in this country. It reinforced a lot of what we found in our two Classical studies.

Cobble: What are some of your specific ideas for how to make the music more accessible in the way they live their lives?

Alvar: A good place to start would be to look at those stations I mentioned that are experiencing success in growing their audience. And we need to stop dressing our presentation of the music in the formalism that comes out of the academy, which is where our history lies. The history of our radio network is in universities and music departments. Not that there's anything particularly wrong with that, but there is a kind of aloofness or a distance to presenting it in this way.

You can present this music with the construct that you are a broad portal, or you can present it as if you're on the proscenium. The origins of the lecture hall, the music hall, the concert hall, are all incredibly valuable elements of classical music education and its history, but radio is really a very specific and unique medium. The relationship between a listener and a radio station can be as strong or as fragile as the bond that people feel they have with it. If you're always made to feel that somehow you're coming up short on what you know about the music and you just don't really qualify to be a listener, then why would you continue to revisit that relationship? Why would you hang around with people who make you feel bad? I don't think that that's necessarily the intent of the presenters, but I do know that when you try to talk about being accessible, there are people who just react very badly to the idea. They can get incredibly upset about it. There's a tradition that has this attitude that this is the way we've always done it and we're not going to be flexible about this. They see change as a kind of heresy.

Cobble: What are the major forces that you see shaping public radio, both today and tomorrow? What do you expect will remain the same and what do you think will be different a decade from now?

Alvar: I've just spent the last six years of my life helping define our core values and I do think there is something immutable about the values that have gotten us to where we are today. My feeling is that in a time of change, particularly the kind of social and cultural dislocation that we're seeing, staying true to those values is really one of the best things you can do. We should feel pretty good about the fact that people think that what we've done with our work is to try to make the world a better place. That's, I think, fairly high praise. I hope those remain the same, because if they don't, I think the fundamental public service mission is really affected.

We can, however, do what the fellow who has done work on the entire core values projects with me calls "attacking ourselves." He wrote a paper for the Station Resource Group on this - figuring out ways to tailor our news programming to reach different audiences. Again, all part of the ongoing specialization and focusing we've seen historically in broadcasting. But we'd still be playing in the same core values arena. We can do this with music too - still very much within the public radio core values, but targeted differently.

Cobble: So, in case there are people in the group that aren't familiar with the values, do you mind just rattling them off.

Alvar: There are three different sets. One for news, one for classical music, and one for jazz and they're all quite different. The jazz and news studies were very popular. The classical study was really controversial. In all three there exists a basic framework which is that the values fell into three categories that had to do with, what we call, the qualities of the mind, the qualities of the heart and spirit, and qualities of craft. Qualities of the mind relates to the intellectual attractiveness and rigor of the work. Qualities of craft had to do with the kind presentation style that has become associated with public radio. In the middle are qualities of the heart and spirit and that's where the great differences exist. It was in the qualities of the heart and spirit, which

is really the emotional center of the format, where the differences emerged. And they were different across all three.

Cobble: So it sounds like you think the values will be staying the same?

Alvar: I would like to see the values stay the same. That's my wish. It's almost like this is our oxygen. It would be hard to switch to nitrogen!

What will change – and it is changing so fast, it'll be different by the time we get off the phone – is the way people are accessing and pulling in content of all different types. It is happening so quickly and at such a fast rate, and there are vast generational differences in the way that it is being absorbed. It's scary to many people. For public radio, the biggest challenge – and for any institution that's enjoyed success doing something one way -- is getting over that initial resistance and fear of change and figuring out the ways in which this can make what we do even better and more accessible and more popular.

But it's tough because we're being asked to make decision and enormous investments on the fly, hoping that things are going to work out. It's very challenging. I think it's as exciting a time as the transition from hand tools to the industrial age. We're beginning to see what the Information Age really means and the change is a hell of a lot bigger than any of us – maybe outside of a few geniuses sitting in Silicon Valley – ever imagined!

The shock waves of this are really just starting to be felt, but how it all shakes out, for want of a better phrase, we just don't know. And in the meantime, you're supposed to be on the air 24 hours a day! So it's a really challenging position to be in for broadcasters.

Cobble: From where you sit, how has the Public Radio Collaboration worked? Are there lessons there for how organizations with public radio can work together and share resources for a common goal?

Alvar: Well, I think that this is another one of these mega themes, of which the collaboration is one iteration, and that is, the greater efficiencies that we might find as a system. In the case of the collaboration, [the question is], "What are the efficiencies in terms of greater communication and collaboration with each other in the production of content through partnership with like-minded organizations and institutions?" More than anything, collaborations in general remain an aspiration. Partnerships are very difficult. Everybody loves to talk about collaboration; we were all taught since we were children that sharing is a good thing. But it's very hard to do. It's hard to make them succeed. Nobody ever wants to talk about when they fail. And it's hard even *when* they succeed, because the magnitude of what's created can be incredibly difficult to manage. How do you organize it? How do you get the word out about it? How do you share what was learned? How do you create the avenues to discuss or replicate it? I think that collaboration has succeeded on many fronts but that it remains more aspirational than realized. Then again, this higher aspiration that we have is what makes public radio such a great field to work in. People are always shooting and aiming high.

Cobble: Can you describe the beliefs with which you launched the project and what you learned from it.

Alvar: We wanted to look at what we call the three franchise formats of public radio: news, classical music and jazz and get as clear an understanding as we could about what those formats offer the listeners who like them best. We hoped that these findings would then be

applied to improve what we do, particularly on the local level with the stations. This is a major programmatic initiative right now. In our current project, the question is - for these people who are attracted to us, these citizens of the world, who live in a kind of global intellectual landscape and have the same sets of beliefs, how intrinsically important is where they live to them? How do they articulate that? To PRPD in particular, having an understanding of this is a prerequisite for creating a strong, local service.

SRG thinks about public radio on an organizational development level. They are probably the best strategic thinkers in the system. They were partners in the project from the beginning as part of their Charting the Territory initiative and some of the very best results and thinking go right to them. Many of us have been at this for over 30 years, starting in public radio when it was like being a member of a Druid cult. So even comprehending the level of success we enjoyed was terribly difficult. SRG's strategic visioning really helped public radio see the forest for the trees - to understand that we had moved out of that beginning chapter into a constant progression.

Cobble: When will your new study be completed?

Alvar: We're conducting the research between March and June. We'll get everything synthesized and we'll report it out at our annual conference, September 13th to the 16th in Philadelphia.

Cobble: Do you think of money or access to capital, as a limiter?

Alvar: Oh, of course! I ran a radio network in Alaska and had a radio station in Barrow that was the only station serving a widely dispersed population in an area the size of some major US states, and they were operating out of a mobile home packing crate! Public radio is a tremendously under-resourced system. And it makes the success it's had all the more remarkable, which, again, says to me that we tamper with kind of the essential appeal and values of that with great, great caution

Things are getting better because we have more listeners and there's more listener support. But there still is a resource issue because we don't have that foundation of cultural and political support that public broadcasters have had in other countries. Here non-commercial, non-profit broadcasting has always been a little bit suspect and an easy target for politicians. So it has its ebbs and flows. I really do think that more money would help enormously. Nonetheless, I am not sure that more money would address all of the challenges that we have. I always think that the greatest challenges we have are challenges of the imagination and vision. But when you have money, you can have more time to develop that vision!

So I think it all kind of goes hand-in-glove; it's not either/or. But most broadcast networks launch a certain amount of new material every year with the understanding that, most likely, a very large percentage of it is going to fail. Because of our limited resources, we have no margin for failure in public radio. We have no risk capital. If we need more money it is to be able to be creative and expressive enough to be able to fail! And to be in a position where we don't feel like the world is going to come to an end when we do.

Cobble: One last question. A lot of the folks that are going to be at this meeting are leaders of broadcasting organizations. They're leaders of organizations that are presenting music. They're leaders of organizations that are actually supporting music. What do you wish they

were paying more attention to these days? What do you think they're too concerned about? You have already talked about education. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Alvar: I know that everyone faces enormous challenges from competition; from all of these different sources of content. There's a real fundamental shift going on between the ways we, as a culture, experience these things. It is moving away from the shared moment to the individual experience. This makes me feel very sad. I just can't imagine a nation of people who are enjoying things all by themselves next to each other. It makes me sad to think that we may lose those moments when you're in a concert or a performance and are experiencing a tremendous kinship and connection with those around you.

9/11 happened the day before PRPD's annual conference was scheduled to start in Baltimore. Of course, the conference was cancelled. Everyone was dealing with the madness of the day. My husband's sister lives in Annapolis and came to retrieve me from the hotel. Her husband's mother was in China on 9-11 and his brother was in Africa. We were all stranded where we were and I remember watching the service at the National Cathedral on TV when the phone rang. It was Koshi calling from Africa and I asked him to hold on a second – I had to turn the TV down as I was watching the service and he said "Oh, so am I." And it was one of these moments when I felt like the entire world was joined together at one moment, all coping with such an incredibly emotional experience. It was such a powerful and comforting feeling. As a culture, we are heading down this road where that feeling of kinship and communion may be lost, which I find heartbreaking. To one degree or another, that's really at the heart of what our challenge is all about.