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MUSIC

MUSIC; Losing the Present While Waiting For the Future

By BARRY SINGER

THERE are nights in the theater, the opera house, the symphony hall that earn the designation legendary. We've all heard about them, or perhaps, with luck, even caught a few. And that, of course, is the point. Beyond their momentary transcendence, legendary nights linger largely because of their evanescence. What becomes a legend most is the very fact that you had to be there.

Television and the recording industry have, to some degree, successfully intruded upon this prerequisite. Audiences beyond those originally in attendance can now share great performances either caught on tape or broadcast live. Still, it's a hit or miss proposition. Sometimes, the microphones and the cameras are present. More often than not, they aren't. But what about the Internet? Can the Webcam actually make every live performance a widely shared, even permanently preserved, event?

For three nights at Avery Fisher Hall in May, the New York Philharmonic, led by the conductor Andrew Litton, presented a concert rendering of Stephen Sondheim's Tony Award-winning Broadway musical "Sweeney Todd." Backing a mixed cast of Broadway and opera performers, fronted by George Hearn (replacing the indisposed opera idol Bryn Terfel in the title role) and Patti Lupone (delivering perhaps the performance of her career), the Philharmonic responded to Mr. Sondheim's music with unexpected passion and empathy. The audiences in turn responded with unrestrained delight, raucously echoing the refrain crowed by the show's meat pie-gorging chorus: "God, that's good!"

These concerts seem to have taken everyone involved by surprise. Not that the merits of Mr. Sondheim's "Demon Barber of Fleet Street" have ever been in doubt. Even stripped to its score and only modestly staged, "Sweeney Todd," in the hands of a symphony orchestra, maintained enormous dramatic power. It also revealed, however, a musical richness and formal sophistication previously suspected but never before so emphatically confirmed. Inside Avery Fisher Hall, the significance of the occasion was unmistakable; for Mr. Sondheim, further acceptance on his own terms in the classical music realm; for the Philharmonic, a category-shattering expansion of its musical embrace.

Here were performances just begging for wider dissemination. And, in fact, the Philharmonic seems to have done just about everything possible to see that the concerts would be recorded and broadcast.

Yet it could not secure either a public television deal or a commercial record contract for the occasion. Only at the instigation of the orchestra members themselves (who also voluntarily reduced their contractual recording fees) was an 11th-hour audio tape of the concerts made, in-house.

How and why these performances nearly went unrecorded sheds light on the priorities of today's broadcast and recording industries, as rampant corporate consolidation reconfigures them almost daily. In fact, though, it is the looming presence of a new competitor, the World Wide Web, that shadows this particular "Sweeney Todd." For, just weeks after these concerts, 66 American symphony orchestras, opera and ballet companies, including the Philharmonic, announced an agreement with the American Federation of Musicians that would soon enable them to offer events like "Sweeney Todd" on the Internet.

The agreement establishes compensation terms for musicians for performances made available on the Web, either through what is known as "streaming audio" -- live music that cannot be stored by listeners -- or as recordings that can be downloaded for a fee. Thus, performances like the Philharmonic's "Sweeney Todd" might one day turn up on the orchestra's own Web site. Though not "Sweeney Todd" itself. As Paul Meecham, the general manager for the Philharmonic, recently pointed out, "It would be extremely time consuming right now to download 'Sweeney Todd.' " And so these concerts are history.

The idea for the "Sweeney Todd" performances by the Philharmonic was conceived in November 1997, says Welz Kaufman, the orchestra's former artistic administrator, as a coda to the Philharmonic's four-year American Classics program, a celebration of the works of 20th-century composers.

"Sweeney Todd" was an audacious choice for the Philharmonic. Its musical director, Kurt Masur, while an admirer of Mr. Sondheim, had never actually heard the show before. Nonetheless, boosted by Mr. Terfel's commitment to appear in the title role, the notion soon gained Mr. Masur's approval, despite internecine carping by Philharmonic administrators who were opposed to what they saw as a sellout of the orchestra to Broadway.

In January 1998, Deutsche Grammophon, Mr. Terfel's record label, evinced a strong interest in recording the event. Contract proposals were drawn up in meetings with the label's executives, including Chris Roberts, the current chairman of its corporate parent, Universal Classics Group (which, in June, was swallowed up by the French conglomerate Vivendi as part of its purchase of Seagram). Casting decisions proceeded in consultation with the record company. Discussions were also entered into with Jac Venza, the director of cultural and arts programs for WNET, to televise the production as part of the PBS series "Great Performances" at some future date.

Then, in December 1999, Deutsche Grammophon suddenly pulled out. Mr. Venza and PBS quickly followed suit.

The sticking point?

"Several changes impacted the potential marketing and related commercial viability of the record,"

Deutsche Grammophon announced in a prepared statement filled with bold pronouncements and curious inconsistencies. "The project did not become a vehicle for Universal/DG artists, as had been suggested early on; other Universal artists (Renee Fleming and Luciano Pavarotti) did not materialize; no future life outside of the recording was planned, such as possible additional performances in other markets; a PBS broadcast didn't happen; a definitive recording of the 'Sweeney Todd' Broadway company already existed; and, ultimately, the N.Y. Philharmonic could not come up with a budget acceptable to Deutsche Grammophon."

In his statement, Mr. Venza was more straightforward: "It was just too expensive."

Yet, nearly 15 years ago, when another Sondheim masterwork, "Follies," was performed by the Philharmonic at Avery Fisher Hall, PBS broadcast the event and a major record label, RCA, released an accompanying recording.

So what has changed since 1985?

Certainly, the classical record business has changed. Corporate conglomeration, coupled with huge crossover successes like Andrea Bocelli and the Three Tenors, have virtually squeezed out more adventurous classical recording projects, leaving behind an industry that has largely lost its nerve. As Mr. Kaufman noted: "The recording not happening can be chalked up to the general crisis in the industry. Yes, Bryn Terfel did leave the project, due to illness -- an ongoing back problem that finally required surgery. D.G., though, bowed out well before Bryn did. It didn't have anything to do with not having his marquee name; it had to do with D.G.'s own financial constraints. And that's across the board with record companies and classical music today. No one wants to spend any money."

The world of public television has changed as well. Increasingly, PBS is more focused on a generation of younger viewers uninterested in either the Broadway of Sondheim or the orchestral music of the Philharmonic.

What has not changed is old-fashioned greed and its power to rule out compromise. In that sense, it must be pointed out that the Philharmonic also played a role in derailing its own hopes for a recording agreement, as Mr. Kaufman indirectly acknowledged.

"The whole 'Follies' experience, which many people point to as a precedent, really wasn't a precedent," he said. "RCA came to us that time and said, we need the orchestra for this first complete recording of 'Follies' that we want to do. This time it was the New York Philharmonic saying, we have this American classics program. Sondheim is an American classic. Let's do 'Sweeney Todd.' The genesis was entirely different."

Then, to read between the lines, could one further difference between the two events have been the steeper financial demands made by the Philharmonic as the initiator of the "Sweeney Todd" concert, rather than as the hired band, for "Follies"?

"Yes," conceded Mr. Kaufman, "it could."

ADMITTEDLY, fine commercial videos of earlier productions of "Sweeney Todd" already exist, as well as original cast recordings. And the Philharmonic has announced it will be pressing 10,000 copies of a limited-edition "Sweeney Todd" recording, mostly for its own subscribers.

Still, what does it say about our contemporary cultural supermarket that neither PBS nor Deutsche Grammophon saw enough potential profit in the "Sweeney Todd"-Philharmonic collaboration to bank on it?

What it seems to say is -- insofar as posterity and performances like these are concerned -- the Internet is the future. For now, though, "Sweeney Todd" in concert at the Philharmonic has been allowed to slip away, eluding all but a relatively few firsthand witnesses and Philharmonic subscribers. It is a sadly ironic kickoff for a century already defined by the promised ability to reproduce music seemingly on demand. Obviously, that promise, unfettered by either technical or commercial constraints, still remains to be realized. Meanwhile, in this unfortunate instance, of such constraints are legends made.

Photo: Patti Lupone and George Hearn in the New York Philharmonic's concert performance of "Sweeney Todd" at Avery Fisher Hall in May. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)