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Orchestrating Change

KBAQ Music Director
Sterling Beeff's Modern
Take on the
Classics

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A taste for excellent performances and a deep knowledge of the repertoire inform Beeff's work at KBAQ. "The grand statement doesn't necessarily impress Sterling. He likes the quieter, more direct artistic disclosures," says his friend, the composer Kenneth LaFave.



A Classic Contradiction

By Darin Trimillos
Photography by Art Holeman

KBAQ music director Sterling Beeff embraces a new world.



Sterling Beeff has his music all mixed up—with his life.

Maybe that's because KBAQ's music director started reading music before he could read words. In fact, he'd just mastered speaking in sentences when he started violin lessons at 3. Once he finished his twice-weekly session, he hurried home to continue practicing.

No surprise then that he went on to win The Phoenix Symphony Orchestra's Young Persons Musical Talent Auditions at 12, and played in The Phoenix Symphony Youth Orchestra, the Phoenix Symphonette and the Phoenix Boys Choir. Later, he published songs and poems and scored music for both film and stage productions.

So perhaps the way music has permeated every aspect of his life accounts for the odd and entertaining way he now crosses boundaries, mixes sounds and brings his own, unpredictable aesthetic to his job picking music for the state's preeminent classical music station.

Beeff spends three hours every weekday morning giving listeners their daily dose of the great composers: Bach, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Chopin and others. But then, you also never know when he'll feature the work of someone completely unexpected—like the eclectic British alternative-rock band Radiohead.

"Last Sunday, Dave Brubeck was the 'CD of the Week,'" exclaims Janine Miller with a laugh. "And it wasn't Dave Brubeck trying to be classical—it was fairly jazzy." Miller, who's worked for seven years as an announcer and KBAQ's music librarian, admits that Beeff isn't the typical classical music director. His juxtaposition of classical and contemporary engages listeners in unusual ways, filling the airwaves with a musical discourse rather than a survey of classical standards.

Every morning, before his stint as disc jockey, Beeff scours piles of music for the day's catch. Atop his cluttered desk, disheveled towers of CD cases resemble postmodern architecture. A few framed posters line the walls, along with some nature shots he took with his digital camera. "I printed those at home," he beams.

For his scheduled airtime, Beeff moves into the studio. In front of him sits a large production board adorned with computer monitors constantly feeding him traffic and weather information. The microphone hovers on a metal arm, begging him to speak. From here, Beeff addresses his listeners, serving as an intermediary between the digital present and the classical canon.



“I don’t just listen to Mozart and Beethoven. I love that music, but there’s a lot that I enjoy.”

“The stereotype of a classical music director is somebody who’s so up in an ivory tower,” says Miller. “But Sterling is very in tune with what else is going on.” For the station’s spotlight on Radiohead, Beeff featured virtuoso pianist Christopher O’Riley instead of the band’s own recordings. O’Riley, the host of NPR’s *From the Top*, is known for arranging the music of contemporary musicians for solo piano and has released two albums featuring the work of Radiohead. By choosing O’Riley’s arrangements, Beeff found the perfect balance between contemporary music and the classical element central to KBAQ’s programming.

“I listen to all sorts of stuff,” says Beeff, although Bach remains his favorite composer. “I don’t just listen to Mozart and Beethoven. I love that music, but there’s a lot that I enjoy.”

Beeff’s diverse tastes grew from his love of learning and an inquisitive personality. Instead of reveling in the familiar, as many people do, Beeff has remained open to emerging trends in music and technology.

“You get to a certain age and, depending on the kind of person you are, you might not want to explore anymore. Times are busy, you’re getting older and you know what you like ... if it’s not among those things, then why revisit it?” But Beeff has

avoided this mode of thought.

“I remember when rap came out,” he recalls. “I thought, *Wow, finally something new*. Later, I realized it was doing what pop music has done for the last 30 years—recycle what it did last week and fall apart.”

In his spare time, Beeff writes and records music on his Apple G5 setup, with multiple monitors and every electronic gizmo he can afford. From the comfort of his home, he can record digitally, mix tracks, burn CDs and even print album art. Gone are the days when a musician needed a record company’s resources to produce an album.

“When I was trying to get a record deal 30 years ago, they wanted your arm and your firstborn son,” he jokes. “It was a horrible business. It’s not great now, but it was a terrible place to be. I wanted to create stuff. I didn’t want to be touring 300 days a year and locked into a record deal where, if I didn’t make it, I’d owe my left nostril.”

Technology has given Beeff what it’s given many other artists: an accessible environment for creation. It’s also given him perspective on the nature of art and its consumption.

“There’s always a price to be paid for digital convenience,” he says. “Take digital photography—it’s great, but it also means that just about anybody can

take a decent picture. So to really take a magical photograph, you’ve got to have a much better eye. The downside is that you’re just that much further removed.”

A multifaceted artist, Beeff plays several instruments, writes poetry and composes his own music. Interestingly, his songs are more in the tradition of Harry Chapin than Frédéric Chopin.

As for music, Beeff holds similar concerns. Years ago, people purchased music to play on a given instrument, to experience it in the first person. As music technology has developed, it’s become increasingly detached. “It made sense somehow, even though it was still mysterious—you put this big black disc on a turntable, you dropped the tone arm on, and you could hear that it started deteriorating immediately ... but it made sense.” With today’s MP3 technology, he explains, music is accessible but therefore underappreciated.

Still, Beeff believes technology will benefit music rather than destroy it. Through online music services such as iTunes and Napster, people can easily seek out music, whether contemporary or traditional. “One of my goals is to get younger audiences listening to KBAQ. It’s in fact helping me that they have access to things they didn’t have access to before.”

On the other hand, he’s also keen on opening musical doors for his older, more established listeners. So he still savors one recent call from a listener who wanted to talk about his insistence on interjecting non-classical music into his playlist. “My guess is that she was getting close to 80,” recalls Beeff. He braced himself for a complaint. Instead, she pressed sweetly to find out where she could buy the rock music in question.

“She said, in this wonderfully broken but great voice, ‘You shrivel up and die if you don’t keep looking for new things.’ And I told her, ‘I want to be you when I grow up,’” Beeff says with a smile. “I still want to be that woman when I get to be 80.”

Sterling recommendations

What’s in Beeff’s CD Player Now

- His own songs for review and production/arrangement ideas
- Alison Krauss and Union Station – *Lonely Runs Both Ways*
- Paul Simon – *Hearts and Bones*
- Concerto Köln and Sarband – *The Waltz: Ecstasy and Mysticism*

The Dozen Titles He’d Be Lost Without

- Leonard Bernstein / New York Philharmonic – *Stravinsky’s Pulcinella Suite*
- Randy Newman – *Little Criminals*
- Glenn Gould – *Bach: The Well-Tempered Clavier*
- Gordon Lightfoot – *Old Dan’s Records*
- Václav Neumann / Czech Philharmonic Orchestra – *Dvořák Symphonies 1-9*
- Nat King Cole – *The Magic of Christmas*
- Sir Alexander Gibson / Royal Scottish National Orchestra – *Holst: The Planets*
- Harry Nilsson – *A Little Touch of Schmilsson in the Night*
- Eugene Ormandy / Philadelphia Orchestra – *Orff: Carmina Burana*
- Carlos Paredes – *The Magnificent Portuguese Guitar of Carlos Paredes*
- Carlos Kleiber / Vienna Philharmonic – *Beethoven: Symphonies Nos. 5 & 7*
- Matthew Best / Corydon Singers – *Fauré: Requiem*

