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# Silenced: ASO used as musical "prop," audience hears recorded music at Il Divo concert

August 14, 2012

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By [MARK GRESHAM](#)



Il Divo's management preferred prerecorded music to live ASO musicians.

Sunday night's concert at the Verizon Wireless Amphitheatre was billed as "Il Divo and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra," but what the audience heard over the sound system was not the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Instead, it heard prerecorded audio tracks by an entirely different orchestra.

The Il Divo singers were live, but the orchestra was relegated to the role of visual window dressing.

According to sources, the musicians were informed at the beginning of a three-hour rehearsal in the afternoon that another orchestra's audio tracks would be heard by the audience. The tracks included instruments that were not present on stage, such as a synthesized bass guitar.

Melissa Sanders, the ASO's senior director of communications, confirmed late Monday that the ASO management on site at Verizon also didn't find out until the rehearsal that while the orchestra would perform the music live, the audience would hear the prerecorded

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Mark Gresham

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orchestra. Sanders said the ASO played live during the entire performance with live microphones hanging overhead.

Nevertheless, the ASO was not in the mix piped to the audience through the sound system. The decision to use the prerecorded music was made entirely by the Il Divo tour, not by anyone from the ASO.

“I was shocked,” said one ASO musician. “There was a sense of disbelief. I wondered why on earth they wanted to book the Atlanta Symphony for this gig if they didn’t want to hear the Atlanta Symphony.”

According to sources, as the Il Divo conductor announced to the ASO musicians that they would go unheard, he explained that this was the first show Il Divo had worked with a major symphony orchestra. He said that, because so many of the local orchestras they use aren’t skilled enough to read or play the music for Il Divo, the company had prerecorded the orchestral parts to ensure consistent quality.

Those audio tracks are loaded onto a computer wired into the sound system, and a special program plays the recorded parts in the appropriate places. It’s a practice that’s widely accepted in television production, and in pop and country music, but it’s rare to have an orchestra on hand as a musical prop.

For those who missed the bus and don’t already know, Il Divo is the operatic crossover vocal quartet created in 2004 by “American Idol” fixture Simon Cowell. In many ways, the four male singers are meant to emulate the success of the Three Tenors, supplemented by a conspicuous “beefcake” factor: French pop singer Sébastien Izambard (some think intended by Cowell to be an avatar of himself), Spanish baritone Carlos Marín, American tenor David Miller and Swiss tenor Urs Bühler. Il Divo has sold more than 26 million records worldwide and has hordes of mostly female fans.

Without question, the 5,000 or so people at Verizon Amphitheatre on Sunday were there to see and hear, perhaps in that order, the men of Il Divo, not the small contingent of ASO musicians as a backup band. One cannot blame the musicians, however, who felt disrespected. After all, the ASO’s own recordings have earned 27 Grammy Awards and the ASO was part of the bill.

It was the first time the ASO has ever served as an “air orchestra” synced to a recording by another orchestra. Its outdoor performances at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta were prerecorded and that audio was used for the television broadcasts. But those recordings were of the ASO itself, not another group.



COMMENTS

**ahahaha** Aug 20

why don't they just put on a cd and dance to it ?

**Jim Denton** Aug 20

I played this as a freelance gig in Houston with several of my colleagues from the Houston Symphony, as well as some members of the Houston Ballet and Houston Grand Opera orchestras several years ago, so we weren't billed as any titled orchestra. I can't speak for my colleagues, but I did it for one reason and one reason alone: the VERY EXTRAORDINARILY EASY MONEY!

As far as Il Divo not rehearsing with ASO, this is very common for touring shows, especially given just how hard touring is. The artists might do one or two of the songs for a sound check but that's it. This is how professional touring shows work with major orchestras: 1 rehearsal and 1 to 3 shows.

But what do I know? I've only played 25 years with the Houston Symphony, 3

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years with the Honolulu Symphony and 1 year with the Ft. Worth Symphony.

### Jacqueline Reidpath

Aug 20

Laurene, allow me to rephrase since you took one comment and blew it out of proportion: I should have said, on THIS tour they brought a 40 pc orchestra with them.

Just as well we have a voice of authority like yours or God forbid, none of us would be any the wiser.

That being said, the bottom line is, none of anybody's comments are going to change the way the musical direction is set up, that's what works for them and that's the way it is.

As for the concert in Denver just yesterday, the boys are well aware of the sound systems wherever they go since they do sound checks as a rule..I wasn't there to know whether they did or not this time but I'm sure if other concert goers thought the quality of the gig was below par, then the someone else's will say so.

I take Erik's point as well..as far as Il Divo and their management are concerned they know they have to take the good feedback with the bad and as long as there are x million fans willing to pay any price to see them then they're not going to waste time or energy defending a decision they have no intention of changing.

### Barbara

Aug 19

Let's give the Il Divo boys the benefit of the doubt. They're talented kinds who have a great gig doing what they love and making real money. Who can blame them? But if they are working with orchestras that have widely variable skills, maybe they need two sets of arrangements: one for the earnest small town orchestras (and those shows augmented by the canned system), and another (sans canned music) for the top tier orchestras they have the privilege of working with.

### Laurene

Aug 19

"The boys always travel with their own 40 piece orchestra, I don't ven know why ASO was needed in this instance."

This comment by an earlier poster is incorrect. The group have used a backing track since the start of their first tour in early 2006 and they use a new pick-up orchestra in each city. (Very occasionally the musicians play two or three concerts in close geographic proximity.)

The schedule is breakneck with set-up/tear-down almost every day, and part of the prep involves getting the local musicians ready to appear on stage. There is a lot more sound in an ID concert than these small orchestras provide; there are instruments and vocals in the audio track which do not appear on stage. The orchestra is mixed into the feed at the conductor's discretion after he has the opportunity to rehearse them.

Professionalism among the pick-up musicians varies, in my opinion. I saw a concert recently where the guitar player stopped playing for several bars to adjust his audio feed earpiece; the guitar music continued nonetheless. I saw another in which the trombone player missed the call for the second half and could not get back on stage; his chair remained empty for the rest of the show. A mixed bag of results from local



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musicians, wouldn't you say?

The shame in this situation is that apparently those ASO musicians who appeared in the concert were not informed up front of the realities of the situation. And shame on whoever decided to bill the concert as “with the ASO,” as clearly it was not the ASO but merely some musicians who also play in ASO. That billing was a serious error in judgment IMO.

**John Elway**

Aug 19

Just attended the Denver CO concert. The concert was a complete disaster. The sound system was absolutely horrible. The treble was so loud that it was hard to hear the singers. When there was a guitar and then piano solo, everyone was looking around for the guitar player and piano and the farce was up. It was clear that the orchestra was just a prop and that IL Divo was simply singing to a recorded track. It was such an absolute embarrassment. To think we paid almost \$200 a ticket to see this farce. If you want to see a show on such a tight budget that they have no live orchestra, a poor sound system, and a 1/2 empty building, go see an IL Divo concert.

**Tzctarts**

Aug 19

I don't know how big is the theatre in question, what I know is that the massive Royal Albert Hall in London never pipes orchestras or proper opera singers, so this nonsensical approach to music makes no sense.

As for the claims that this group's musical arrangements are so complex that some orchestras can't perform them, well, are they more complex than something by Shostakovich or even Stravinsky?

**Erik**

Aug 19

Besides the article, which screams “light accuracy” (I've been working in pop industry...and classical industry to know how this works in fact, and how the sound is actually obtained). The comments are revolting. I do not care about these Il Divo guys, but I have never seen such narrow-minded, stuck up individuals who believe anything they read. I would like to see you handle a concert every night, in a different city, in a different country... under ANY circumstances. I know someone who works for them and it's grueling for singer, tech people etc. And for God's Sake: IT'S A POP SHOW!!! Get over yourselves. As for their singing skills and experience, maybe you need some background whenever you discuss an artist's potential. Also, maybe ASO should have been more offended BEFORE they got their paychecks.

**James**

Aug 19

Kevin Smith: perhaps you have trouble reading. It had nothing to do with the “American” musicians. The decision was made by Il Divo who are apparently too weak to play with live musicians. Again, perhaps your reading skills are not proficient enough to note that only one of the quartet is American, the others being French, Spanish and Swiss. Smith, get off your high horse. If you are not American yourself, we would appreciate it if you did not come to the US everytime you need a

bailout or your nose wiped. We are, after all, on our death bed! If you are American, why stay in a coffin? Just leave, I might even help with the air fare.

**Brenda Francine**

Aug 19

First off Il Divo have sang with huge orchestra's, one is the Royal Symphony in London, they do it all the time. Those who like to put this group down have no idea the talent, the level and training that they have. Their education is way beyond anything you have heard of. 3 are Opera singers and one is pop singer out of France. They are not just singers. Just ask Barbara Streisand and then how about Celine Dion, maybe talk to Oprah they all know what this group is all about. They toured with Barbara and Celine. What happened is not their fault and it is done anyway by most so what is the big issue. Those sitting out in the audience didn't even know it so why should they get their money back, you had a wonderful evening, wonderful music so just why would anyone give you money back. Don't go to any musical then be it opera, pop, classical, etc. if you don't like what happened.

**Kevin Smith**

Aug 18

How uniquely American. Another nail of idiocy into the self-built laughingstock coffin.

**Lacey**

Aug 18

I love Il Divo, love their music, and I don't care what you all have to say. I heard the young men sing in St.Louis, MO. and they were wonderful. I really don't care who accompanied them, they could have gone without it for all I care.

**Ann**

Aug 18

I've been attending ASO concerts for 62 years...from the days they played at the old Atlanta Auditorium. I went to Verizon to see and hear Il Divo, and I'll bet that is why 99% of the concertgoers went. If I want to hear the ASO, I go to their concerts. Let it drop.

If the management of the ASO agreed to a "silent" concert, so be it. At least the ASO members who played at the concert were paid.

The ASO amd ASOPA are in a sad economic plight...read what is on this site as the number one article on 8/17. They all have bigger headaches than Il Divo could ever bring them.

"The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Players Association (ASOPA) released its most recent counter-proposal, a plan that includes an 11 percent pay cut for musicians based on a corresponding cut in compensation for management and senior staff."

**Alice**

Aug 18

Have any of you, who are so insulting towards Il Divo's abilities, ever been to a concert???? If not, then perhaps you should speak of what you know, and resist the commentary otherwise. I've heard them sing with nothing but a piano to accompany them, and they sang lovely and amazing. I think the controversy over the non-use of the orchestra was never their decision, and if it happened, it was the

exception to the rule. I don't want my money back – I attended to hear their voices. The orchestra is the icing on the cake.

**Bob** Aug 18

Musicians train their entire lives to show their art to the world. If I was a sitting member of this orchestra, and had someone say to me what was said in paragraph 7, I would have got up and walked out. If you don't think a group “skilled enough” to keep up with your 4 pop singers, then go somewhere else. For the symphony members that sat there and took it. Shame on you.

**timothy price** Aug 17

Why would musicians pass up the opportunity to be dynamically creative with the like of the ASO? Il Divo seem to have lost, or given up, human connection, preferring instead the technical regularity of recordings. Can't imagine that it would be satisfying, and really is such a sad rejection of what could have been a more wonderful, if perhaps exciting, experience for all, .... and it would have been better.

**Alvaro** Aug 17

, is pointless.  
(To conclude my previous post)

**Alvaro** Aug 17

If anyone equates Il Divo with true artistry and musical integrity, I'll puke. That said, they have a style, a place, and a following. They are world renown and they expose mainstreamers to (a smattering of) the eternal repertoire. To expect a “classical” concert experience at an Il Divo show is tantamount to expecting Hip-Hop from Ted Nugent. Save your elitism for situations that require your taste and knowledge to be elite. Spending this much energy berating these lads who are just trying to earn many bucks.

**Elizabeth** Aug 17

“No, the problem is that Il Divo is not skilled enough to work with a large orchestra. The continued dumbing down of society. Using their tracks as enhancement for certain effects I can understand, to use the symphony as a set piece? Ridiculous!”  
AMEN to that. This is the most infuriating thing I've read in a long time. Never been much of a fan of that kind of classical crossover thing (I'm a classical musician, but I love other genres — any music performed really skillfully), but I think that this is just further proof that this kind of group is comprised of sub-par classical musicians dumbing performing dumbed-down repertoire for the sole purpose of making money off the public. It makes me angry in any case, but this is taking it too far. It's the ATLANTA SYMPHONY. They aren't exactly a mediocre orchestra.

**Ray** Aug 17

I have worked with one of the Il Divo singers and he is fully capable of singing with

an orchestra. A very talented individual. I would assume that the others are of similar capabilities. It all boils down to management and packaging of a product. It is brilliant that this has happened to such a high profile singing group. The audience deserve complete honesty in entertainment as they have paid much for a ticket. The money should be ethically refunded to any audience member who were not pleased with the performance. I can remember a strike by the orchestra union and we had to announce before the show that a recording would be used instead of live accompaniment due to a strike. There were a few boos but the show went on and hardly anyone wanted their money back. The audience were treated honestly from the get go. Simon Cowell knows quality entertainment however he needs to think twice about the nature of his audience, which pay him millions.

**Church Musician**

Aug 17

Same thing happens at Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas. They have a large orchestra that at least some of the players are hired in from local symphonies. You don't hear them or the choir through the speakers, though. You hear everything prerecorded, except the soloists. I think it's really deceitful.

**Lynda1952**

Aug 17

I read some of the comments defending these four young men. Poppycock. It's my understanding that they were all professional, trained, respected singers before they were pulled together to form Il Divo. Based on my own limited experience with their recordings (I wasn't all that impressed and never had any desire to hear them live) as well as input about their repertoire and arrangements from musicians I've known and trusted for decades, they have clearly acquiesced to a contract that allows them no artistic input or control over their output, apparently in exchange for being paid stupid money and receiving lots of ego-stroking by fans. who don't seem to care that their golden boys are being used so shamefully. If the members of Il Divo didn't know the details revealed in this article, they're either stupid or just don't care to pay attention to how they're being promoted. If they did know, it's even worse. Either way, it makes them just as responsible as anyone else in their entourage and company for this unethical and disrespectful practice. I have no respect for anyone associated with them. Nor do I have any respect for the orchestra's conductor or members for shutting up and participating in this charade. Shame on everyone involved. And where IS the voice of the musicians unions, which is supposed to hold its members to a much higher standard than we've seen here? I have no problem with karaoke in its place, but I do have a problem when people are asked to pay live performance prices for karaoke without being told that's what they're getting.

**Musician127**

Aug 17

This is an insult to a symphony as well as the audience members. Shame on il divo for ever thinking this was something that you could get away with. I'm angry

**Richard Vida**

Aug 17

” He said that, because so many of the local orchestras they use aren't skilled

enough to read or play the music for Il Divo, the company had prerecorded the orchestral parts to ensure consistent quality.”

No, the problem is that Il Divo is not skilled enough to work with a large orchestra. The continued dumbing down of society. Using their tracks as enhancement for certain effects I can understand, to use the symphony as a set piece? Ridiculous!

**Harris**

Aug 17

EVERYONE in the audience should have their money refunded by Il Divo, or in this case ill diva. This is absurd and totally unacceptable. Unfortunately, like some have stated, this group will not be hurt by this blatant disregard for ethics but it would seem to me that future audiences should be made aware of this outright deception.

**Oscar**

Aug 17

Where is the Musician's Union on this issue?

**Ismartjaw**

Aug 17

I am not surprised at all. This is the exact type of behavior that has dragged down the quality of art in America. Thank you Hollywood for making sure that professional, highly skilled, educated, quality, musicians such as those in the ASO would be squeezed in such a manner. But you know, it's really more of a reflection on the lacking musicianship currently being used by the singers. A real singer knows how to work with an orchestra and a conductor. And a really good manager knows how to help a singer grow as an artist. These men in Il Divo will never be anything other than what they are... well dressed karaoke singers. Pathetic.

**Mark Gresham**

Aug 17

In answer to John Dawson's question: Our sources had told us that the live orchestra was in the mix to the monitors, so heard by the singers, but were not in the mix piped to the audience.

**Jacqueline Reidpath**

Aug 17

Just reading some of these comments here. I am a long time fan of Il Divo and as a long time forum member and avid concert goer of theirs (I have never missed one concert tour yet in Sydney, NSW), I can attest that some management decisions throw the boys into a bad light. Sure, they decide on the music that goes into the show since it is their baby but the musical DIRECTION comes from the technical side. Brian Burke was the brains behind the techy stuff on this tour, as he was with the Live In London gig and resulting DVD – for which they used the London Philharmonic. So it is not the first time they have used a live orchestra and I can assure you, the London Philharmonic went live and they had no problem interpreting Il Divo's complex musical arrangements. The boys always travel with their own 40 piece orchestra, I don't even know why ASO was needed in this instance. I agree, that's why there is such a thing as REJEARSAL and the conductor was very snotty to say that, as long as an orchestra has a piece of music in front of them they can play it, same as the boys' standing orchestra had to do in



th beginning. If you want to blame someone, blame their technical management, the boys don't plug in the mikes or fiddle with the engineering. Once again the crap has come back to hit them in the face. They have been around for eight years as Il Divo and between them have nearly 50 years operatic/pop background behind them.

Their singing could be done with just an acoustic guitar, or a capella as they have done on some songs..they don't really need an orchestra for the wuiet stuf but when it comes to the big rewporked calssical numbers, yes they do. A shame management couldn't just let it be.

#### **Jamalshookup**

Aug 17

What a slap in the face — not only to the ASO, but professional orchestras everywhere. What an excuse to skip rehearsals and getting to know and interact with the orchestra. All of this reads like some 'joke' Simon Cowel is playing on everybody, but someone should tell him that's it's far from funny.

If you put mere showmanship first over talent, then profits follow, but the lifespan of the group will be short. If you put talent first over showmanship, than profits still follow, but the lifespan of the group will be longer.A lot of that not only stems from good artistic and business sense, but common sense, as well. A little respect can carry you a long way.

Someone who judges talent on a national TV show ought to know that — by now.

If Il Divo's managment think that their group is so much better than the orchestras they "play" with, then from now on, Il Divo should hold nothing but acapella concerts. Let's hear these 4 carry a concert by themselves; their management might quickly 'change their tune'.

Better yet, why not get Simon Cowel on stage to croon a bit? If it is one of his 'jokes', let's hear him sing, and then we can all laugh at both it and him.

#### **anduarto**

Aug 17

One the cheesiest moves I've ever heard of. If "Il Divo" (yuck) wasn't going to use ASO's musicians they should have been up front about it from the beginning. And the management of ASO should have declined their performance. What an insult to their musicians. I say, full-out boycott of this cheesy band of prima donnas.

#### **jason sah**

Aug 17

I am a professional and know several freelance musicians who have played the Il Divo gig. They sure as hell don't do it for the musical satisfaction.

But this is more a screwup from the ASO. Some ASO person should have known that Il Divo is a classical music joke, and not associated the ASO with a group like that.

#### **John Dawson**

Aug 17

What is the meaning of "live microphones" if the orchestra was not included in the mix?

#### **John Dawson**

Aug 17

Scandalous.

There's got to be more to this story...I do not believe that the ASO players could not be heard.  
Nevertheless...

**a real musician**

Aug 17

Terrible. What a disgrace. The ASO is a professional orchestra! The fact that this group of preferred their "canned" recording shows how musically shallow they are. True musicians are not only able to interact with other live musicians, but thrive on that interaction. Besides, that's why you have REHEARSAL, so that you can start to get used to each other.

In the end, my opinion won't matter, since they're so wildly popular anyway, just like most teen pop "sensations." But this goes to show you what kind of musical culture is being cultivated by the "American Idol" shows out there – showmanship wins over true musicianship. Think about it – this is the first time this group has worked with a major orchestra, and they've been around how long? For real classically-trained musicians, this is a staple of their training, not an afterthought as it is for this group.

Signed, a real musician (who can play with other real musicians)

**Bobby**

Aug 17

Treating the ASO as a Giant Powerade Bottle? We see this issue now with churches dropping their musicians for karaoke. Here we go again!

**Jacqueline Reidpath**

Aug 17

That it is common practice does not make it legitimate in live concerts. An orchestra with such a stellar reputation as ASO should never have been approached by Il Divo's MANAGEMENT in the first place. In their defence, the boys do their jobs and sing their hearts out, blame it on their management whom I think have been grossly over-cautious in this instance. They always cop the flak with management decisions and I agree, it was very disrespectful to over dub them, very insulting.

**E.J. Foust**

Aug 17

It doesn't say much about the Il Crappy singers if they can't hang with the big dogs. This is a real embarrassment to people who work their whole lives to be real musicians....not just some cracker jack karaoke artists...seriously...

**Barbara**

Aug 17

The Il Divo conductor explained that "many of the local orchestras they use aren't skilled enough to read or play the music for Il Divo." I think it is the other way around. Il Divo may not be skilled enough to work with an orchestra.

**lin**

Aug 17

Oh please!! I want to hear il divo live, they sing live anyway, who cares about the background music!

**Allegro**

Aug 17

Is this an April Fool's joke?

**eric gelman**

Aug 15

I WANT MY MONEY BACK AND I WILL POST THIS CRAP ALL OVER THE SOCIAL SITES. FANS SHOULD KNOW WHAT HAPPENED.

**Pa**

Aug 14

I assume that since Il Divo can use fake accompaniment, they wouldn't mind if ticket buyers paid with Monopoly money.

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