

Payola and Publicity

Luis C. Engelke

Performing on a tour with Orquestra Sinfônica Brasileira in 1992 was an eventful experience in many ways. There were four concerts in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, alone. These included concerts for the Fernando Henrique Cardoso – the nation’s president at the time – congress and other dignitaries. Not only were these concerts enjoyable, the orchestra was truly treated like royalty performing in outstanding venues, staying in the most lavish hotels, and of course eating the most delicious Brazilian cuisine. The final event of the tour consisted of one outdoor concert by the city’s train station, where the greater public could hear the orchestra. A news team was there and quickly they asked several musicians what they felt about performing in a venue like a train station. The first five or six musicians all responded similarly that this had been an outstanding tour and there was great appreciation for the opportunity to perform for audiences that might not hear live classical music regularly. Before any thought could be completed, the reaction of the news team was to pull away and immediately dispatch to the next musician available in proximity. As noted, this occurred several times.

At last the team made their way to the Principal Flutist. His response was one of outrage at performing at such a dirty location with poor acoustics: his parents did not send him to a European conservatory to return to Brazil and perform in these types of unappreciated and deplorable locations. Moreover, not unexpectedly, the evening news story was titled Orquestra Sinfônica Brasileira expresses outrage at performing at train station, and of course, there was only one interview aired. The story was written before the reporters arrived; they just needed some small bit of collaborating evidence to support their account.

Music is largely disseminated through publicity. Even great artists have to promote themselves or have someone promote them. Where is the line drawn between publicity vs. legitimate and unbiased review? Can anyone know if what he or she is reading is genuine discourse or covert propaganda? This is the case in many aspects of society. Perhaps no news is completely unbiased; however, in music we can see cases where there is obvious manipulation of media to promote sales.

The 1950's were known for many things, including game show scandals where these competitions were not genuine but scripted to produce the greatest ratings. Payola is somewhat the musical equivalent of this practice – at least because the first accounts occurred during the same time. One might think that paying a DJ to play their music on the radio makes complete sense, assuring their music is aired and heard. This and other subtle practices are however against the law and termed Payola. Read two short articles regarding Payola, and ask yourself how are other aspects of society similar. Following is a personal correspondence from *Fanfare* magazine assuring a favorable review if a recently released recording is advertised in their magazine. In principal, is this really any different than Payola? Can reviews really be taken seriously? Do emerging artists need to buy their publicity? Are there any other ethical concerns? Is there an issue of public trust?

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