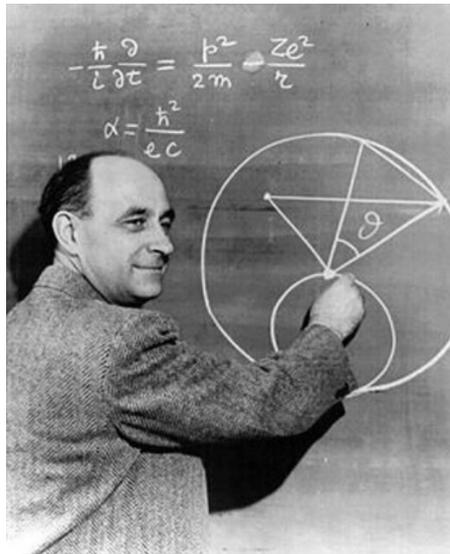


# The Washington Post



## Orchestras' class(room) act

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Latest in the never-ending series of orchestras' educational endeavors: the Boston Symphony Orchestra has launched an on-line "[Classical Companion](#)" to Beethoven's nine symphonies, with videos, lectures and a "Beethoven Music Lab" that allows you to create your own development section to three of the symphonies. It's all very nice: Jan Swafford's brief video introductions to the individual symphonies are pleasant but too short to be of real use, particularly without telling musical examples.

The benchmark for this kind of thing is the San Francisco Symphony's ambitious [Keeping Score](#) project. Michael Tilson Thomas, the SFS music director, understands perhaps better than any other conductor the potential of the brave new media world: "Keeping Score" is a [TV series](#) (next up: Shostakovich, starting October 29; check local listings), a [radio series](#), and an interactive on-line component, with the requisite educational arm. It's impressive and extremely well done.

It may be unfair to compare something on the scale of Keeping Score with the smaller-scale educational ventures of other organizations. The fact is, though, that classical music institutions are widely accepting the idea that it's their responsibility to educate the audience -- to help teach people about why they should be interested in the product that the institutions are offering.  
*(read more after the jump)*

It's true that people who love music are often eager to learn more about how it is made, particularly about the ways people who make music think about it. One nice feature of the "Keeping Score" TV shows are the clips of orchestral musicians giving their views on the composer in question. Similarly, the Washington Performing Arts Society's podcast series ([archived here](#)) offers performers talking about themselves and the music they'll be performing -- far more interesting than most program notes.

The part that I question about some of these projects -- and about many of the well-meaning pre-concert lectures one encounters -- is the relentlessly didactic tone. Music institutions are feeling, it seems, a responsibility to assume the role that educational institutions are abandoning, in terms of teaching people about classical music. (Opera America is even offering, for a price, four-week on-line courses in a program called "[Online Learning](#);" the current one, which has already started, covers Puccini's "La Bohème.") But there's a fine line between conveying useful information and lecturing at people.

It's true that the more you know, the more you can appreciate what you hear or see -- in any art. But do we really want to be conveying the idea that it requires a special education to enjoy a concert? Or to equate concert-going with school? I realize that Bernstein's Young People's Concerts were wonderfully inspiring, but I still wonder if lecturing at audiences -- particularly younger audiences -- in the 21st century is really the way to win them over.

On the other hand: what's the alternative? Discuss.