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Music to Fit Your Mood

A novel if unscientific way to choose a concert.

In the never-ending quest for those mythical beasts, the Young Audience Member and the First-Time Concertgoer, orchestras are dangling all manner of bait: musician blogs, preconcert cocktails, show-and-tell performances. The San Francisco Symphony's latest entry is the Concert Concierge, a Web site (www.sfsymphony.org/concierge) created to help users pick what concert to attend.

It is designed, the orchestra says, to make classical concerts more accessible. "Our art form can be very intimidating," said Michele Prisk, the director of marketing, pointing out that many of the names of works and guest artists are in foreign languages. "We're trying to simplify what is a very complex decision-making process for a lot of people."

At the site, users can check boxes for the type of instrumentation and period of music they're interested in. So far, pretty straightforward. They can also select the mood they're interested in. And that's where the fun begins. Say you're interest-

ed in an orchestral piece from the Baroque period and you're feeling "edgy/intense." Sorry, no sale. But change that request to the Romantic period, and you get a hit! And with actual exclamation points!! The Concert Concierge, with its little front-desk-bell icon, delivers: the cabaret-inspired vocal work "Frankenstein!!" (yes, they are part of the title) by HK Gruber. But then, "Frankenstein!!" also answers to "light/fun" and "pretty/pleasant," because the program includes Debussy's "Danses Sacrées et Profanes," Thomas Adès's "Living Toys" and Bizet's "Jeux d'Enfants."

Let's stick with light/fun. How about choral music in that vein? Any period, from Baroque to contemporary. The only

option, it seems, is Mozart's "Coronation" Mass: a great piece, to be sure, but not necessarily light and fun.

Under the category of pretty/pleasant Romantic music, not a mood one would normally associate with the period, the concierge offers 11 programs. Among the works are Shostakovich's Symphony No. 4 ("a synonym for danger," the concierge tells us) on a program with Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1, coupled with "The Flight of Icarus," a tone poem lasting 20 minutes by John Pickard complete with "pounding timpani and rocking brass fireworks." Pretty? Pleasant? Maybe if you are a test pilot.

Dan's cut:

"As regards the mood aspect," to which the program gives less weight than the other variables, "we're the first ones to say that's highly subjective," Ms. Prisk said. Besides, the programs are varied and necessarily will include conflicting moods.

In any event, she said, the site generates 300 hits a week, and a survey of 400 users conducted after the sixth week of the season found that about a quarter of them bought tickets. Rest assured, she added: once people are in the hall, the concert experience remains unchanged.

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