

# The New Criterion

Notes & Comments February 1994

## The death of a classical station

In this period of cultural decline, it is a special sadness when a classical radio station dies and is replaced by a station catering to rock or other popular programming. This is what happened in December to wncn-fm, a long-time New York metropolitan-area classical station. On barely twelve hours' public notice, it was transformed into Q-104.3, or what the press release called a "Pure Rock radio station, featuring the music of Aerosmith, ac/dc, Pearl Jam, Stone Temple Pilots, Led Zeppelin and much more." For GAF Broadcasting, wncn's owner, the conversion was the triumphant climax of a campaign that began in the late 1980s with the progressive and calculated destruction of the station's serious programming. Vocal music was cut out; all music written after World War I was proscribed, as was all "difficult" music of whatever period; regular taped live orchestral broadcasts were limited to the Chicago Symphony; the announcers adopted a trivializing, bantering tone; *Keynote*, the widely read and influential WNCN monthly program magazine, was eliminated. Everywhere the appeal was to the young, as always assumed to be frivolous and ignorant.

And so when wncn finally died, there were few music-loving listeners left to mourn. In gaf's remarkably meretricious and smug press release, the death was presented as something inevitable: "The change was brought on by extensive local market research, indicating a tremendous unserved need in the marketplace. With two classical stations remaining in New York, the classical audience will continue to be well served." One need look no further than this press release to find the rationale for putting yet another rock station on the air: "*We are also taking this opportunity to build a radio station that entirely supports advertiser and consumer needs. gaf will invest heavily in developing an organization that operates with customer needs in mind. Our philosophy is to focus on your success.*" (All italics in the original.)

What has been lost, then, by the long illness and sudden death of wncn? Not, surely, a great classical station, for WNCN was, at the end, nothing like that. What was lost in this whole process was the possibility of fulfilling the four vital functions of the

---

What has been lost, then, by the long illness and sudden death of WNCN?

broadcasting of great music: playing records that give musical pleasure and enlightenment, especially to those who cannot afford to buy large numbers of discs; providing information about the compositions and performances broadcast, to aid listeners in their purchases of records; providing thoughtful commentary, to educate listeners; and, perhaps most important, airing live concerts and operas, to give listeners a conspectus of contemporary developments in the world of performance and competition. Even in the best of times, these four functions have proved difficult to fulfill, but in a period like the present, with the standards and ideals of high culture under fire from every corner, it is more necessary than ever before that classical stations dedicate themselves to their fulfillment.

---

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 12 Number 6 , on page 1

Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | [www.newcriterion.com](http://www.newcriterion.com)

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/1994/2/the-death-of-a-classical-station>