



John Buckman, founder,  
Magnatune.com

# Surfing the soundwaves

By engaging with consumers on their technological level – and by employing people with the same mindset – your business will be transformed

In 1980 classical music represented 20 per cent of global music sales. In 2000, the figures had plummeted to two per cent. What happened? Did all those people suddenly lose their taste for classical music? Or is something else going on?

At Magnatune.com, an online record label I run, we sell six different genres of music, ranging from ambient to classical to death metal and world music. Yet classical represents a whopping 42 per cent of our sales. Even more intriguingly, only nine per cent of the visitors to our music site click on 'classical' as the genre they're interested in, yet almost half of them end up buying classical music. What's going on here?

From *Harry Potter* to *Gladiator* and *Lord of the Rings*, classical music (and especially early music) is ever present in popular culture. Recently on MySpace, a classical musician going on tour playing Vivaldi drew comments indicating the kids thought Vivaldi himself was going on tour, playing his recent compositions.

You may laugh but this is a wonderful phenomenon. Young people don't *a priori* think classical music is different from other forms of music; there's nothing inherently uncool about it. The era of DJs and the mash-up has blended genres. Minimalist composer Wim Mertens sits beside electro-chill-out on the massively best-selling Buddha Bar compilations.

The upside of the iPod and its song-oriented nature is that people want a wide variety of styles, moods and genres in their mp3 libraries. They're completely open to classical, world, jazz. And most importantly, they've been trained by the internet to surf and to think for themselves in deciding what they like and want to listen to.

However, we in the music business have to take the first step, to reach out and let this new audience listen and evaluate us on their own terms.

What's huge today? YouTube, MySpace, mp3s, blogs: that's how this audience discovers things. They explore, read, listen on their own terms. If you're really bad, they blog about how awful you are (case in point: the major labels) and you drown in a sea of negative publicity.

However, if you engage on their terms, with open licensing agreements such as Creative Commons licences ([www.creativecommons.org](http://www.creativecommons.org)), free listening of music via internet radio ([www.shoutcast.com](http://www.shoutcast.com)), allow some mp3 trading and avoid evil (such as DRM, not paying artists and exploitative pricing), this new public will respond with gusto.

Not only will they listen and buy and come to your shows, but they'll blog about you, make you a 'friend' on MySpace, play you in their podcasts and make YouTube videos about how cool you are. Don't underestimate the effect this will have: kids today respond much better to peer endorsements than to any advertising or magazine reviews you can garner. A single sloppy, badly formatted, ugly blog entry will drive hundreds of people to you. And those are the unpopular sites. A single podcast on Dave's Lounge, a run-of-the-mill podcast, led to 300 CD sales in a few days when they played our music.

Some orchestras such as the UK-Based Fiori Musicali ([www.fiori-musicali.com](http://www.fiori-musicali.com)) have gone all-internet, with all their ticket sales taking place on their website. Yes, this alienated a certain Luddite audience but this was replaced by an entirely new demographic who never previously thought of

attending classical concerts because they didn't fit into how they run their life. And, of course, the increased profits – both in decreased labour costs and increased sales margins (by avoiding middlemen) – reinforce their decision.

What does this mean for music ensembles? It means getting a young person into your organisation, who lives and breathes blogs, podcasts, MySpace and mp3s (as all young people do today) and fully engages in that culture. It does not mean a slick, expensive website that doesn't change.

You should create a blog giving behind-the-scenes insight into your music and the people in the group. Make an email list and a web-board and encourage comments and active discussions. Put mp3s up for download under a sharing-friend Creative Commons licence. Make a MySpace page with audio samples. Sell your tickets online and use an online calendar service to show all upcoming events.

None of these things are expensive, as dozens of companies compete to provide them to organisations, usually in the range of UK£10 (€14.50) per month. In fact, everything I suggest above can be done for free if you prefer.

This new public doesn't want slick: they want authentic, they want deep, they want substance. Give the public what they want and you'll find a wealth of opportunity in the new internet reality.

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