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KUSC's Interactive Team Makes Classical Cutting Edge

By Charlie Jensen

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Arts for LA presents a series of first-person explorations of projects, places, and principles that demonstrate the ways arts and culture are building the future of Los Angeles. Each installment in this series showcases ways in which arts, culture, and arts education can be employed as tools to address issues facing Angelenos in all aspects of our lives and ultimately contribute to a higher quality of life for all residents.

While media outlets continuously point to a perceived decline in the audience for classical music, some of its most ardent fans have sought successful ways to broaden and diversity it. One such group is KUSC's Interactive team, a small but innovative group of thinkers dedicated to expanding the reach of classical music by placing it in the hands, earbuds, and brains of mobile technology users. By combining the music experience with text, maps, images, and video, KUSC is reaching new listeners where they are -- on the go. I sat down a few weeks ago with Chris Mendez and Carly Gillis to talk about their mission to tap these new audiences while invigorating the experience of their existing fans.

KUSC is one of the largest classical public radio stations in America. Some listeners, though, might not know KUSC's work extends beyond the radio waves onto mobile devices and tablets now through the work of your group, KUSC Interactive. Can you describe how your team got its start and how you focus your projects?

Chris Mendez: It started with Brenda Barnes, president of KUSC. She felt the arts community needed to have a stronger, more innovative presence online. A few years ago, she wrote a doctoral project on it while creating a series of projects and teams focused on innovation throughout USC. One project, Music X, brought together USC faculty and students and gave them an opportunity to spitball ideas about what might be possible innovations. We took those lessons and brought them into closer integration with KUSC Radio. KUSC interactive is the latest iteration and the embodiment of everything Brenda learned through the Music X project. We have four "pillars" that structure our work--we produce rich multimedia content, we provide a platform for dialogue and discussion, we promote learning through the art of listening, music history and theory, and we pioneer new forms of music discovery and collaboration.

CM: We have two clear audiences in mind: millennials -- college students we want to get interested in music through fun, interactive ways -- and older audiences who know KUSC as a brand, love the station, and want something to complement and enhance their listening. On the other hand, we know the audience is changing every year as more and more people become comfortable with new media and new media devices. For example, people above the age of fifty are the fastest growing demographic when it comes to web browsing, and that audience didn't really mature until this year.

You've released two inaugural applications -- SoundSnips, which allows users to listen to classical music "snips" while reading interesting facts about the music, and World Venues, which takes iPad users on a virtual tour of the world's great concert venues. How did your target audiences play into the choices you made in crafting the apps?

CM: A lot of the interactive projects we work on follow a philosophy of "story-driven listening," where you learn as you listen. We wanted to make sure people were encouraged to listen or, ideally, to visit a concert in real life. One way we thought we could get there was through delighting and enlightening them with facts about the music or places. With SoundSnips, we decided to do it in a fun way while still telling these great stories.

Carly Gillis: We came into some research that older audiences are latching onto iPads quickly. They appreciate the larger screen and they don't mind reading a lot of text. They'll invest time in devouring the content. World Venues is very much like that -- a place to explore, to learn histories. With SoundSnips we had a much different audience in mind -- people who don't have as much time but want to know how to appreciate music quickly. We made SoundSnips reflect that with tweet-sized bites of information for people who don't have enough time to really devour something in the same way.

One of its successes of SoundSnips seems to be the way it's geared to spark the interest of both seasoned listeners and new listeners alike.

CG: That was something I really tried to focus on with SoundSnips' content, ensuring all the information included could be understood by people with no musical background. SoundSnips was my first project, so I myself had a lot to learn about classical music. As I

context of the piece--how to appreciate and where it exists in time. It doesn't overload people with too much technicality and it leaves time for fun.

What challenges did you experience in building out the apps and completing all the research required to make them so successful?

CG: A difficult part of making a music app -- or any app -- is licensing. Thankfully, we encountered an organization called MusOpen. Their mission is to make public domain recordings of classical music. It was amazing to find that. Nearly all recordings on SoundSnips came from MusOpen. We were able to take their recordings and use them to make the snips. I never thought of classical music as having copyright because it's old, but you have to think about the musicians in each recording, the conductors -- they also merit compensation for their part of the work as well. Along with MuseOpen, we were able to use the Open Goldberg Variations, which was a Kickstarter project. Kickstarter itself is interesting because it takes the temperature of our culture by requiring a lot of people to invest money in something before it can happen, and this project was an example of that. This group was able to get funding to create open source recordings of the Goldberg Variations. Without those two sources, our apps would not be able to exist the way they do now. SoundSnips, in fact, uses all the Goldberg Variations from that project.

World Venues is different from SoundSnips in both its focus and its mode of engaging the user. In fact, it's less about the music itself and more about the experience of the listener in a live performance -- quite a departure from radio. How did this idea come about?

CM: As a team, we discussed how important the idea of space is to the listening experience, yet how often that experience is taken for granted by the listener. No one has done a project where they put the space center stage, so we opted to celebrate it, and that allowed us to dive into both architecture and music in a digital space, which no one has done.

CG: This was our most research-heavy project. The thing I kept finding was documentation about music performance so rarely discussed the spaces in which these pieces were performed. I tried to find beautiful coffee table books about the great opera

acoustics is like black magic. And speaking of black magic, we found halls people felt strongly were haunted and we wanted to talk about those as well.

You'd expect to find certain places on the tour, but you found some really surprising venues to include -- even if you're a music or architecture expert, you can still walk away with new information.

CM: Some of my friends call it "armchair traveling." We wanted to tailor it to users who wanted to be at home enjoying something rather than going through the pains of traveling to see something -- we can bring it all to your own home and delight you that way. We want to make people more musically fluent, enrich their lives, and we're doing that by creating something interactive but also unearthing hidden stories we haven't been able to find until now.

CG: I didn't have much of a background in music before working here. I played cello growing up -- that was my one touchstone -- and so I've been able to learn to adore everything about classical music, or "art music" as people are starting to call it now. I'm excited to be part of changing the connotation around this music. People get into it through cinema or by visiting Disney Concert Hall or the Hollywood Bowl. We've tried to use both a knowledge point of entry and a location-based point of entry to help people find their way in to appreciating the music itself.

Pop music is so present in our lives now because of the level of journalism taking place on a daily basis, but we don't have that same level of access with classical music, and your apps start to change that.

CG: Classical music isn't "pop"-ular in the same way, but I would challenge the notion it's not present in our lives--it's everywhere and in everything. Instrumental music is in shopping malls, for example, but it sometimes take an extra step to appreciate fully. With pop music or music with words, there's an instant way to learn more about it -- it hands you information on how to understand it: "This is a love song! Love is being shouted at you!" But listening to Brahms, you might not immediately understand it was inspired by his unrequited love for Clara Schuman. It doesn't hand you the narrative, so you have to figure it out. That's been a cool problem -- how to give people that extra step so they don't have to hunt as much.

World Venues seems to ratchet up the user experience by incorporating videos from the actual halls themselves.

CG: Using video was a big decision for World Venues from the beginning. My goal was to give people a way to visit the concert hall, which means attending a performance. I searched YouTube and found a lot of great material to work with, from the shaky-cam audience member video to the fully professional performance video. You get different senses of what it's like to be in various seating areas, how big the stage is, and how good the acoustics are.

Tell me what you're most excited about in the future of this work.

CG: The "New York Times" just wrote another story about how classical music is dying. People have been saying classical music has been dying for the last century, but that's not accurate. It has inspired so much music today. It shares so many relationships with all the music we consume today, and I look forward to highlighting that relationship. It's a niche interest, sure, but people are still going to music school, people are still learning the Brandenberg concertos. It's still there. I want more people to understand it's not yesterday's music--it's today's music too. I've always been a storyteller, and the wealth of stories we have here through our music is neverending. I just can't wait to tell them.

Chris Mendez is the Director of KUSC Interactive. In this role, he oversees the creation of digital platforms, stories, and experiences for web, mobile, and other forms of interactive media. He recently completed a master's degree program in communication management from the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, with concentrations in brand strategy and digital product development.

Carly Gillis is the Interactive Content Lead for KUSC Interactive. A storyteller by training and trade, she uses her background in journalism and content management to select and package the narratives told through each app.

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