

The Beautiful Music Radio Format: An Insider's Perspective

By Dennis R. Ciapura

Fine music formats, like Classical, have historically given rise to intensely loyal audiences, but no format has ever enjoyed the breadth and depth of response as the format we came to call Beautiful. Beautiful Music was a ratings force in the marketplace from about 1970 until the mid 1990s. During that quarter century run many of the basics of the science of radio format design were developed by the pioneers who made Beautiful a national phenomena like none the industry has seen before or since.

While most major markets had “good music” stations like WGAY from the early ‘60s on, the real genesis of Beautiful Music as a format scientifically designed to be nearly addictive for its listeners was born of the genius of an ex Paramount TV executive and Harvard MBA named Jim Schulke. Schulke was keenly aware of how carefully controlled stimuli could affect human behavior. He also knew that Muzak modulated the tempo of music designed for the workplace to improve productivity by gradually increasing tempo from morning until the lunch hour then starting the cycle again through the afternoon. Schulke took this philosophy a giant step forward by developing a very structured system of controlling every facet of the format’s construction and presentation.

Schulke’s company, Stereo Radio Productions, later Schulke Radio Productions, or SRP as it became known, offered a format that would enable FM broadcasters to achieve significant ratings at a time when AM still ruled the airwaves. SRP’s Beautiful Music format was constructed in 15 minute segments in a process called “matched flow”. The musical selections in each segment were artfully matched and sequenced so that each segment flowed like a continuous performance. At it’s best, the results were nearly hypnotic. Listeners would stay tuned for 8 hours or more per day when typical radio Time Spent Listening, or TSL, was a couple of hours. This extended TSL was critically important because the bottom line ratings imperative was (and still is) Average Quarter Hours of listening, or AQH. AQH was the product of cumulative audience (CUM) and TSL. So, for a given size of audience, extending the TSL directly inflated the AQH, and the client station’s revenue!

But, SRP’s format control extended beyond the music itself. Schulke was obsessed with protecting the integrity of the format’s presentation, or format execution. To be an SRP client station the station’s owner had to agree to certain overall format constraints and execution points. Commercial content was limited to 6 minutes per hour. Most stations were averaging 18. Commercials were also to be run at reduced volume level, -6dB, and commercial acceptance policy was very strict. Whenever possible the client stations were expected to accept only straight voice spots, or those with very soft music and moderate tempo. Nothing “jarring” was allowed. If a station absolutely had to run a slightly strident commercial to protect an account, the high frequencies were rolled off to tone it down.

Part of the rationalization for running the commercials at -6 dB was that there is a 3 dB center channel buildup compared to the level of either the left or right channel because the center channel is comprised of left and right together. Also, since the music was uncompressed its average level was often less than that of the music. So, the spots were limited to -6 dB to ensure that they were never louder than the music. Another effect of this, whether intentional or not, was that on radios playing a low volume levels, as was often the case when Beautiful was played for background, the spots would virtually disappear.

Announcers were, of course, very carefully selected. Except for the brief news reports, virtually every word they spoke was very carefully scripted. Particular attention was paid to the image IDs and great emphasis was placed on call letter recall, important to ratings recognition. To enhance recall and imaging, call letters were changed to lifestyle oriented monikers. Good examples were WLIF in Baltimore and WLYF in Miami.

“W L I F, Baltimore, we call it LIFE” or, “When you’re listening to beautiful music you’re listening to W L Y F, Miami, LIFE”.

The key targeted demographic was women 25-49. They had enormous buying power and were much sought after by the ad agencies for many product lines. What came to be called housewife time (10 A – 3P) was especially important because Beautiful made excellent background music in the kitchen and around the house. So, if those radios stayed tuned to an SRP client station the quarter hours of listening would pile up at a terrific rate. Therefore, anything that could annoy females was avoided like the plague.

Schulke was adamant about audio transmission standards. Client stations were to employ no compression whatsoever so that the full dynamic range of the music was preserved. Distortions of all kinds were to be passionately avoided and SRP client stations were expected to have top notch tape decks, control room consoles and transmitters. Also, the lack of audio compression reduced the average volume level of SRP stations on the air, which meant that higher antennas were required to maintain wide signal coverage without objectionable background noise.

In the beginning there were few FM group owners who bought into the Schulke rhetoric, and Sudrink Broadcasting and Southern Broadcasting were among the earliest, largest and most successful. They fully endorsed Jim Schulke’s program execution criteria and supplied their stations with excellent studio equipment and some of the tallest antenna facilities in the country. Dave MacFee, Vice President of Programming for Sudbrink Broadcasting, eventually joined the SRP organization to help other clients to transition of the Schulke approach to FM broadcasting.

Over time, a kind of paranoia developed at SRP about potential audio defects resulting in less than optimum ratings results. A whole belief system emerged, which the station program directors and engineers came to refer to as the “Schulke mystique”. For example, excessive bass or compression were believed to turn on males, but turn away females. So, if the ratings were weak in female demographics, the subject station was often suspected of suffering from signal processing problems resulting in compression.

Similarly, since females were known to have better high frequency hearing, high frequency distortion or excessive highs were believed to drive females away. If both demos dropped the spots were too loud, strident or annoying. The Schulke mystique drove the station engineers and program directors crazy. When the ratings were up everything was okay, but any ratings decline was invariably blamed on format execution or technical factors at the station. It was a high pressure environment, particularly for the program directors, but many went on to achieve great success in the industry. Dick Foreman from Sudbrink’s WLIF in Baltimore eventually became Vice President of Programming for ABC Radio Networks and today is a leading station broker.

Another part of the Schulke mystique was the veil of secrecy that surrounded almost everything about the SRP product and the format execution consulting provided to SRP client stations. Employees were expected to treat everything about the format as trade secrets. Station owners were also led to believe that SRP employed special methods in the production of its music tapes that generated stronger listener appeal. The idea was that SRP clients were getting a product that

could not be obtained anywhere else, and equally important, could not be duplicated by a client who might want to roll his own.

Ironically, the tapes SRP provided to its clients had some significant problems. For economic and logistics reasons SRP used high speed tape duplication. One-to-one dubbing was not practical because of the enormous amount of time and tape machines that would have been required to supply dozens of clients with hundreds of hours of tape. The problem with high-speed dubbing is that the maximum frequencies the tape machines had to handle were multiplied in proportion to the speed ratio. For example, if the 7 ½ IPS client tapes were dubbed at 4:1, the duplication system had to be flat to 60 kHz to if the client tapes were to be flat to 15 kHz. In fact, the SRP tapes were not much good above 10 kHz. They also had more tape hiss than first generation tapes. There also were low frequency problems, partly due to the need to filter the audio to prevent interference with the 25 Hz cue tones that were used to trigger the station automation systems. These defects were easy for the better station engineers to spot because one had only to compare a few selections from records to the same selections on SRP tapes to reveal the anomalies.

SRP later installed newer duplicators, which ironically had even worse high frequency response when first placed into service. This was eventually corrected and the overall response, noise and distortion of the new system was an improvement. In fact, Irv Joel, SRP's engineer, had probably developed the ultimate reel-to-reel high speed duplication system. By the mid '70s SRP tapes finally sounded pretty close to the records in terms of fidelity and had the advantage of having the clicks and pops removed during the mastering process. In those pre-digital days this was a tedious manual process performed with a razor blade! The SRP tapes also benefited from some gentle manual leveling that improved the signal to noise ratio and made the uncompressed broadcasts more practical for automobile reception.

While the station managers, who were responsible for sales, were initially thrilled with the ratings results, they soon discovered that SRP's brand of Beautiful could be a hard sell to the ad agencies. SRP stations were frequently asking for permission to redo spots for programming compatibility, which the agencies often took as an insult to their creativity. The agencies and direct clients also soon became aware of the low spot levels, and this became a frequent source of contention. The limited commercial avails also became an issue as the stations became more successful. The revenue generation limitations of Beautiful arose from the combination of this limited spot inventory, tight commercial acceptance policies, and some ad agency skepticism of large AQH ratings that were so TSL driven, which meant a relatively small CUM for a given AQH.

Aside from the sales difficulties, listeners began increasingly to complain about redundancy. After listening to the same quarter hour segments, frequent listeners (most of the audience) began to know what selection was coming up next. They were unconsciously memorizing the segments! Ironically, the matched 15 minute matched flow segment structure, which was the format's greatest strength, also became its Achilles heel. The only solution was to replace the segments with newly constructed ones more frequently, and this put tremendous pressure on SRP.

New and powerful competitors also began to spring up in the form of Bonneville Broadcasting's syndicated Beautiful format, which was similar to SRP's, and Century Broadcasting's, which was quite different. Instead of the fixed 15 minute matched flow segments, Century used several tape decks and pulled each selection from a different reel. The automation systems could then be

programmed to create new segments all the time. The matched flow proponents scoffed at this approach, but WLOO, Century's Chicago station, was achieving great success against SRP programmed WLAK (LAKE) and Bonneville programmed WCLR (CLEAR). Interestingly, Century did not subscribe to SRP's compression ban. WLOO was as loud as most of the other stations on the band, and the commercials were played at normal levels. Some managers of SRP programmed stations began to wonder if the Schulke mystique was more hype than science.

By 1979 SRP was sold to Cox Broadcasting, but even as the big syndicators fought it out in the major markets, scores of independent Beautiful formatted stations sprang up all over the country. These smaller operators, often individual stations, formed the Independent Beautiful Music Association, IBMA. As the format continued to mature all Beautiful operators shared one problem: lack of its most important component – new Music. The very success of the format virtually ensured that all existing product would be consumed in a few years and suitable new product simply wasn't being produced. Now everyone was having redundancy problems. The larger syndicators began to produce new music, mostly in Great Britain where the costs were lower and suitable talent more available. The IBMA found help in form of a pioneering Beautiful station in Silver Springs, Maryland, just outside Washington, DC – WGAY.

WGAY was owned and operated by Greater Media, Inc. In addition to the Beautiful format on WGAY, Greater Media had several other stations running a company proprietary adult contemporary format called "Magic". The Magic format was produced and duplicated at Greater Media's headquarters in East Brunswick New Jersey. Peter Bordes, Greater Media's Chairman, was a great visionary and gave his programming and engineering executives free reign to pursue the best technology and methods. Greater Media even had an audio R&D lab at its corporate headquarters. A custom mastering and duplicating facility had been built featuring the latest Sony phase compensated tape decks in a 1:1 duplication system. Extreme attention was paid to audio purity in the design and operation of the system and the accompanying mastering studio. By this time Bob Chandler, WGAY's Program Director, was producing custom music with John Gregory in England with the intent of recovering the cost of the operation by selling the product to independent Beautiful Music stations, primarily IBMA members. The very high fidelity 1:1 duplication system at the East Brunswick HQ was ideal for duplicating WGAY's custom product, which was marketed as Beautiful Hits.

John Gregory was, and is, a brilliant composer, conductor and arranger. John was one of a few arranger/conductors chosen to produce BBC orchestra performances. There was no BBC Orchestra per se. Whichever conductor was selected for a given performance would assemble an orchestra from among the many very talented union musicians working in the London area and put a program together. John was ideal for the Beautiful Hits project. The mission was to create lush orchestral renditions of contemporary pop tunes. This ensured a constant flow of format compatible new music. John knew all of the very best musicians and they enjoyed working for him. He was in his element in the recording studio. The Beautiful Hits sessions were done at some of the best studios in London, including PI and Olympic. The orchestras were usually comprised of between 33 and 38 musicians. The earlier sessions were 16 track, but soon transitioned to 24 track. Beautiful Hits production peaked in the summers of 1977-78 with as many as 80 new selections being recorded in a season. It was about that time that Bob Chandler had his first heart attack just after completing a day long session.

Beautiful continued to be a powerhouse format for a few more years, but the audience was aging out of the target demos. This meant that the revenue opportunity was diminishing and the major market Beautiful stations gradually eased into soft rock formats. In recent years this trend has

been accelerated by the corporate consolidations that have seen so most major stations acquired by huge publicly traded corporate operators. The individual station owners and small group operators who might have kept the format alive are now either gone or retired. Schulke died on August 6, 1998 of complications from Pneumonia at age 77. Sadly, Peter Bordes and Bob Chandler are also gone. The format still exists in secondary and tertiary markets in some form or other and can still produce a large following in areas with a large retirement community. More importantly, it thrives in the hearts of music lovers of all ages who still thrill to the magnificent sound of big orchestras weaving their magical sonic tapestry.

About the Author:

Dennis R. Ciapura (e-mail: dciapura@sedona.net) is President of Performance Broadcasting, a Sedona, Arizona based consulting company providing management and acquisition analysis services to the broadcast industry. From October 1995 to May 1999 he was a Director of Triathlon Broadcasting Company, a publicly traded broadcast group with 32 stations in 6 markets, which was sold to Capstar Broadcasting. From January of 1995 to June 1998 he served as Sr. Vice President, Operations and coordinator of special projects for SFX Broadcasting, a large publicly traded broadcast group with 90 stations in 36 markets. In this capacity, he participated in acquisition-related due diligence activities and implemented various cost control measures as well as planning and managing consolidation projects. SFX was sold to Capstar Broadcasting for \$2.1 billion.

Mr. Ciapura was previously Executive Vice President, Operations for Noble Broadcast Group where he had served in various management positions since 1986. Prior to coming to Noble, Mr. Ciapura was President and Chief Operating Officer of Starnet Corporation, a telecommunications subsidiary of Ford Aerospace. Before being acquired by Ford, Starnet was a division of United Brands and Greater Media. Mr. Ciapura was Group Vice President, Telecommunications at Greater Media, a radio broadcasting and cable television company headquartered in New Jersey. Prior to joining Greater Media in 1978, Mr. Ciapura held various engineering management positions with Sudbrink Broadcasting from 1972 to 1978, and with Key Broadcasting from 1970 to 1972.

In total, Mr. Ciapura has participated in the development of six broadcast groups embodying nearly 200 stations of all sizes. He also has had over 80 papers published in the broadcast trade press, and in addition to his corporate management background, has worked in virtually every area of broadcast operations including engineering, administration, capital planning and control and sales and marketing.

Courtesy of Don Hobson