

Sad Plight of American Radio



By BYRON BELT

Special to The Republican

NEW YORK — The sad light of American radio is the subject of endless conjecture by critics, professional and otherwise, and while quality continues to slip, public use of the AM and FM bands remains astonishingly high.

Radio was possibly in trouble even before the advent of television, but even with the blue haze dimming nearly every home in the land, an audience has remained true to the aural delights and horrors of wireless communication.

For insomniacs and those unable to travel anywhere without their security blanket of sound, the transistor radio has brought constant chatter and high density noise within the pocketbook of all. While the noise-murder individual does his happy way, others around him cringe at the incessant noise pollution dispensed at shattering intensity from millions of mechanical monsters.

FM, with its static-free reception and richer sound potentials, came upon the land at the end of World War II. Acceptance was extremely slow, and when owners grabbed up the FM bands at ridiculously low costs, many of the buyers were operators merely honoring a market they wished to stifle.

Today, with the Federal Communications Commission lately exerting some influence, a joint ownership of AM-FM bands is not encouraged, and variety of programming on those mutually administered is a requirement. Well into the middle of the 60s, FM remained the exclusive (and relatively unprofitable) domain of classical music and public service broadcasting.

Somehow something went awry, and FM today is rapidly becoming a high-potential sonic slum. Rock and sterical advertising, once the curse only of small AM stations, have become accepted on the aristocratic wave bands, and any reasonably sensitive listener finds less and less to admire and enjoy.

As with TV's slavish emulation of weekly ratings, AM radio has more or less bowed to the almost paranoid objection to the medium by advertising agencies from coast to coast, withholding support for

quality broadcasting. Madison Avenue pundits have almost singlehandedly transformed radio into the same waste and that television continues to pretend does not exist.

There are a few encouraging oases of sound spread throughout the land, but they are pitifully few, and seem to shrink almost daily.

New York, Chicago, Washington, Boston, San Francisco and one or two other spots are the only localities which can be said to have high quality commercial radio at all. Expanded efforts to develop a viable public broadcasting network for radio may bear fruit ultimately, but the urge is weak, and the accomplishments unencouraging to date.

Chicago is better off than any other city, including New York. WEFM, the Zenith station, and the oldest, offers

a solid variety of good music and intelligent musical commentary. WNIB, without enormous resources to compete for live broadcasts and prestigious international taped concerts, offers in Sonia Atzeff's intelligent and imaginative programmed the best planned recorded concerts hour after hour we have encountered anywhere.

Chicago's giant is WFMT, probably the best all-around radio station America has ever had. Twenty years old this December, WFMT is directed by manager Ray Nordstrand and program director Norman Pellegrini. As "Chicago's fine arts station," WFMT offers round-the-clock broadcasting of classical music and some folk music, with various special commentators such as noted critic Claudia Cassidy.

The standard of excellence has been reflected in the passionate involvement with the station's existence by its

audience, and the grudging but seemingly admiring participation of commercial sponsors in need of the intelligent WFMT public.

Of the commercial good music stations, probably none reaches so large and influential an audience as Manhattan's WQXR. Broadcasting on both the AM and FM bands, the New York Times-operated station is currently up for sale. It is expected, according to program director Robert Sherman, to retain its classical format, but to survive in the tense marketplace WQXR has had to make many compromises.

The primary sacrifice is the one WFMT refuses to make — WQXR programs move awkwardly from a Bach suite to a rocking commercial for Florida orange juice. Even the slick airlines messages can jar the ear and mind when they

come close upon a musical masterpiece.

The chief delights of WQXR are the the programs administered personally by Sherman, who has a relaxed, folksy approach to so-called "serious" music, and is yet as professionally knowledgeable as anyone in the field, and those produced by music director George Jellenik, who brings wide authority and special European flare to various special programs.

Because of the enormous prestige of its owners, and the station's established role as the biggest FM station (with serious competition only from WNCN, which could easily become as good as WFMT with the proper determination, and Pacifica Radio's erratic WBAI) WQXR is becoming a source-center for radio elsewhere.

Sherman's daily two-hour chatter-platter program, "The Listening Room," features important guests almost every session, and Jellenik's two major programs, "The Vocal Scene," which he narrates, and "first Hearing," which features three leading critics in discussions of new recordings, are now nationally syndicated.

With increased involvement by non-profit public broadcasting, and a more daring determination to maintain quality and offer a broader public service, FM radio need not resign itself to noise and brainless offerings. The federal government has a responsibility to guarantee the continuation of some degree of quality in the public media, and FM is the best place to start.

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