

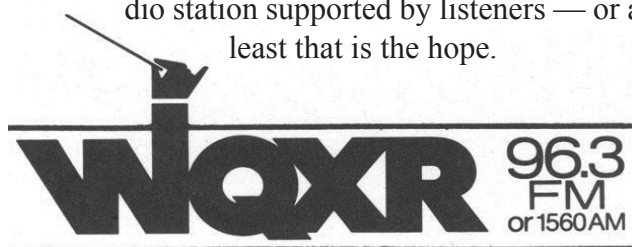
ADIOS, WQXR!

BY GERDA BIKALES

In the annals of America's gradual retreat from the bedrock of Western culture, July 15, 2009 is a milestone to remember. On that day, the *New York Times* announced the sale of its iconic classical music station to Univision, the giant Spanish-language media company.

The announcement shook New York's classical music world profoundly. Under the name WQXR, the station had operated since 1936; it was bought and operated by the *Times* in 1944 and has been the city's only commercial classical music station until now. Would classical music on the dial go under in the cultural capital of the United States?

No, not entirely. WQXR will keep the name and move to WNYC, a non-commercial public radio station supported by listeners — or at least that is the hope.



Assurances have been uttered that some of the popular programs will continue, and connections with storied institutions such as the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic will be maintained. Well, as they say, we'll see.

What is decidedly lost is the geographic reach of the old WQXR. Once a powerful station received by listeners all over the metropolitan New York area and well beyond, it now reaches far few-

Gerda Bikales is a member of the advisory board of the Social Contract. Formerly the first executive director of U.S.English she is currently a member of the board of directors of ProEnglish.

er homes. Living in one of the close-by New Jersey suburbs, I mourn the loss of my reliable daily connection to the world's most exalting music, which had been my constant companion in times of sickness and health, of misery and happiness, in moments of calm leisure and of stressful overload.

Today's received wisdom would have us believe that classical music is an elitist interest, the ultimate creation of despised Dead White Men, whose tastes in music and much else are of no longer of consequence. My own discovery of classical music has convinced me of the contrary. As a teenager newly arrived in America from the destruction of war-torn Europe, I received the fortuitous gift of a cheap radio that crackled and emitted a muddled sound. I soon came upon WQXR, and in my rapture I tuned out the scratchy acoustics and rarely did I move the setting on the dial away from 96.3.

The hardship of penury in the life of this young immigrant working girl and evening college student was eased by the great concert hall that was always open to me through the magic of my crackling radio. There was no money in my bare budget for tickets to hear *virtuosi* musicians perform at Carnegie Hall, nor could I afford to buy their recordings and the equipment to play them, yet thanks to WQXR I was blessed with their presence in my life. My spirits soared as the beauty and power of the classical repertoire filled my being. Long after I reluctantly turned off the radio the music continued to resonate in my imagination.

Brahms, Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Schubert quickly became my heroes. The celebrities whose pictures adorned my notebooks were Vladimir Horowitz, Jasha Heifetz, Artur Rubinstein, Robert Merrill, and other stars in the classical firmament. I got to know them all, at no cost. To this day, I have lived off the musical foundation I was able to build for myself through the good graces of WQXR.

It is sad to think of all the music lovers who have been cut off from the fount of musical nour-

ishment that WQXR had been to New Yorkers for three generations. Admittedly, there are other ways now to listen to music — a wide array of electronic gadgetry and several subscription services, all of them requiring money and, usually, electronic know-how.

Almost from the beginning of America's nationhood, its diverse people have been receptive to the cultural contributions from many other traditions. We see this in the variety of our cuisines, in the arts and differing lifestyles. We have coined a phrase to describe this acceptance: cultural enrichment. And indeed, it has been that.

But in an era of rapid change driven by mass immigration and failing assimilation, a nagging question presents itself: when does cultural enrichment become cultural displacement?

We now have the answer: when WQXR-FM is ousted from its strong central position at 96.3 on the dial and shoved to a weaker one near the end of the spectrum, ceding its long-held privileged location to a Spanish-language station, we have definitely arrived at that moment. ■



The view from inside an early production booth at 730 Fifth Ave, New York, the location of WQXR. It was the first licensed high fidelity station in the U.S.