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# Style

## Music

### *NSO in Full Bloom Without Ear Buds*

By STEPHEN BROOKES  
Special to *The Washington Post*

It was enough to make any music purist run screaming back to the Victrola.

As conductor Emil de Cou took the podium at Wolf Trap on Thursday night, he urged the audience to put on headphones, switch on their iPods and settle in for an evening of — shudder — *music video* from the National Symphony Orchestra.

The end of civilization as we know it? Probably not. De Cou was merely conducting another of his multimedia experiments aimed at supercharging the classical concert experience and drawing in new listeners. As the NSO's Wolf Trap conductor, he has mounted two wildly successful concerts of video-game music in the past year, and last summer performed the music to "The Wizard of Oz" as the film played on a huge screen above the orchestra. The shows drew thou-

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## NSO's 'Fantastic Planet' Concert, Conducted With the iPod in Mind

MUSIC, From C1

sands of new listeners.

So Thursday's "Fantastic Planet" program — breathlessly subtitled "A Symphonic Video Spectacular" — was fully in keeping with de Cou's anti-elitist, let's-try-something-new ethic. As gigantic video images of Earth and the cosmos (provided by NASA) danced overhead, de Cou led the NSO through a lively, fast-paced program that ranged from Henry Mancini to Georgy Ligeti, including bite-size chunks of Beethoven, Stravinsky and Vaughan Williams.

The music was perfect for a summer evening; de Cou is a smart, perceptive conductor, and the NSO players, happily released from their formalwear, cut loose with enthusiasm and evident pleasure. It was a particularly good night for Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" — a work whose ferocious beauty just explodes when played under the night sky — and for Vaughan Williams's ethereal "Serenade to Music," which received a transfixing performance dedicated to NSO principal trombonist Milton Stevens, who passed away this week.

But it was de Cou's novel attempt to bring the iPod into the concert setting that was the most unusual part of the evening. At first glance, it seems absurd — who puts in ear buds when the orchestra is about to play?

ety slid off my headphones, and by intermission it was impossible to spot anyone still plugged in. We'd all slipped comfortably back into right-brain, pre-podcast concert mode.

The video side of the evening, while pleasant enough, was another good idea that didn't quite pan out. The NASA images were often spectacular: swirling nebulae, planets drifting through space and epic shots of the natural majesty of Earth. Even the spectacular gets dull when there's no narrative, though, and as the images floated by, the whole thing began to feel like one of those endless, unfocused travelogues you see on French television.

Perhaps the problem was just that the music itself was too good. Rich in ideas and subtle beauties, surging with power and exalting emotions, most of the works on the program were complete in themselves. They already contained whole worlds and rewarded full attention. Any additions would inevitably feel excessive.

But de Cou's experiments are important: He's one of the few conductors trying to open new doors into classical music, either with video (de Cou, 48, was first drawn to music by the 1940 film "Fantasia") or other new technologies aimed at younger audiences.

"People have a stronger demand for visual

But de Cou's idea was appealing: If listeners want to learn more about the music, they can download a running commentary by the conductor, then listen to it while the orchestra plays.

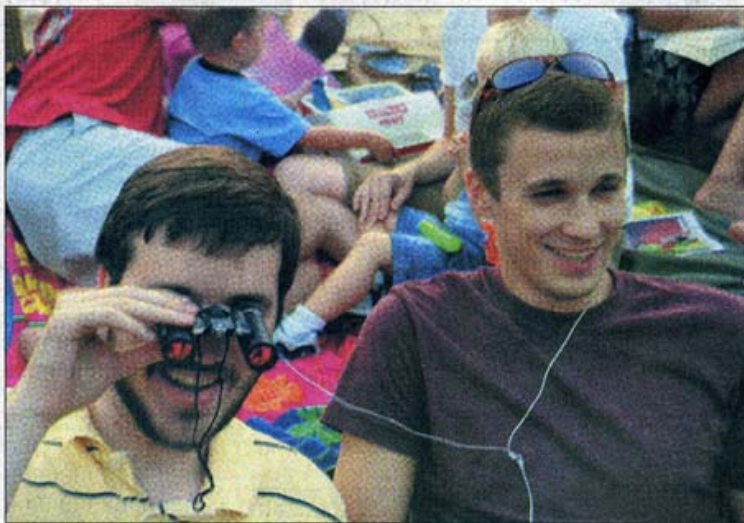
"I thought it would be neat to have the conductor being your seatmate, whispering into your ear at key moments," de Cou said before the performance. "A little about the history of the piece, or why the music was chosen, or something about how the images and the music line up."

It's an intriguing idea — a bit like those self-guided audio tours you can take through museums, or DVDs where the director talks you through the movie.

As it turns out, though, concerts present a different challenge. Forget the obvious issues, like how you hear the orchestra if you're wearing ear buds, how you stay in sync with a live performance and — most importantly — how you keep from looking slightly ridiculous.

The main problem — and it's a big one — is that there's nothing more annoying than having a "virtual seatmate" constantly whispering in your ear while you're trying to listen to a live performance. (Perhaps it's some kind of struggle between the left side of the brain, which processes language, and the right side, which processes music.)

Two minutes into the opening piece I qui-



BY ANDREW PROPP

Emil de Cou provided commentary via podcast to Thursday's audience at Wolf Trap.

input now," he said, noting the explosion of imagery people are exposed to, from cable television to the endless churning sea of YouTube.

"But for the most part, symphony orches-

tra concerts are presented the same way they were in the Eisenhower administration. People should not be afraid of experimenting. The arts are durable — we're not going to break Beethoven by trying something new!"

[ The Washington Post ]

# BUSINESS

THURSDAY, AUGUST 2, 2007

## An NSO World Premiere: Symphon-iPod

By MIKE MUSGROVE  
*Washington Post Staff Writer*

The iPod will make its live concert debut with the National Symphony Orchestra tonight.

The NSO and Wolf Trap are making a podcast exclusively for this performance so the audience can hear, in one ear, recorded commentary from conductor Emil de Cou about the evening's selections as he simultaneously guides the orchestra onstage through an ecologically themed program titled "Fantastic Planet: A Symphonic Video Spectacular."

The program will feature video footage, provided by NASA and other government agencies, of underwater volcanoes, the Grand Canyon and frozen mountains in Antarctica. As accompaniment, the NSO will perform works selected by de Cou, such as Claude Debussy's "La Mer" and Igor Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring."

"It's another way to reinvent the orchestra and the concert experience," de Cou said yesterday. "You have to try everything that's out there."

To keep the iPod users in sync with the program, the podcast will pause a few times during each of the two parts, indicated by a bell chime.

The podcast, available as a free download through Apple's iTunes store and at [www.wolftrap.org](http://www.wolftrap.org), is a first for a symphony orchestra, according to de Cou.

# InformationWeek

## iPod Makes Its Debut With National Symphony Orchestra

***The podcast for Thursday's multimedia symphony performance is an effort to make classical music less stuffy, says NSO conductor and podcast host Emil de Cou.***

**By Antone Gonsalves  
InformationWeek  
August 2, 2007 04:23 PM**

The National Symphony Orchestra has turned to the iPod to make classical music less stuffy to people more likely to rock 'n' roll.

The NSO has made available through Apple's iTunes an educational podcast that people can listen to on the iPod or any other MP3 player while enjoying Thursday night's performance of "Fantastic Planet: A Symphonic Video Spectacular." The performance is scheduled for the Wolf Trap National Park for the Performing Arts near Vienna, Va.

The multimedia program features video from NASA and other government agencies of underwater volcanoes, the Grand Canyon, and Antarctica mountains. To go along with the images, conductor Emil de Cou has chosen a number of works, such as Claude Debussy's "La Mer" and Igor Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring."

Through the podcast, de Cou will give the listener some context on the music, and explain why he chose it for a particular video. The commentaries will be short for each piece. Listeners will be instructed at the beginning of the podcast to turn on the device at the downbeat, which is when the orchestra begins a piece, and then turn it off as soon as they hear a beep. The idea is to give enough information to make the performance more enjoyable, while not getting in the way of the music.

Symphonies and opera and ballet companies have introduced many tactics over the years to take away the misconception that the performances are too highbrow for the average American. Ballet companies, for example, have often done programs based on pop music, and opera companies regularly display translations for performances.

De Cou told *InformationWeek* that "Fantastic Planet" is an experiment for NSO, which hopes to interest people who may not otherwise attend a symphony. "It's a way of making the experience of going to a symphony performance not so stuffy," he said.

Classical music didn't always have that elitist reputation. In the days of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, for example, concerts lasted for hours and people would eat and drink during the performances. "There was more of an earthiness in the way concerts were performed," de Cou said.

The NSO hopes efforts like the podcast will take away the aura that has evolved around classical performances. "It's overly reverential, and it gets in the way of enjoying the music," de Cou said of the current perception. "One of my personal crusades is to kick the stereotype out the door."

De Cou believes the podcast will be a less intrusive way to learn about a performance than having to read a program while the music is playing. "It's better to have the conductor say a couple of things," he said.

The commentaries, however, will be short. After, it is all about the music, which cannot be fully enjoyed unless a person takes the time to do nothing else but listen. "This is something that feeds your soul," de Cou said. "The greatest and most profound music is something that demands a lot of yourself to be put into it, or you get nothing back."

Classical music listening could be up or down, depending on the numbers considered. According to Nielsen SoundScan, classical music sales rose 22.5% in 2006, after falling 15% in 2005, *The New York Times* reported. Those numbers, however, included crossover albums from performers like Josh Groban and Andrea Bocelli. Take away those titles, and classical sales fell by 28%, according to NPD Group's consumer surveys.

