

classical

Facing *the* Music

Why John Birge is grateful for “falling into” being a classical music host By Luke Taylor

Early on, John Birge had no intention of being an on-air host. “I wanted to be a recording engineer,” he recalls. “I was scared to death of talking on the radio.”

That changed when, as a college student at the University of Cincinnati’s College Conservatory of Music, Birge took a work-study job operating the control board at classical public radio station WGUC. He was assured he wouldn’t have to say anything on the air, except for the occasional station identification or brief weather forecast. “That helped me get used to the idea, and I just sort of fell into being a DJ,” says Birge, now Classical Minnesota Public Radio’s morning host. “I’ve been doing a daily air shift for, what – 29 years now!”

Hosting may not have been his original vision, but as a teenager, Birge had decided that he wanted to do something connected to his first love, classical music. His parents loved music – they attended concerts and listened to classical public radio in their hometown of Plymouth, Mich., near Detroit – and Birge and his siblings all took piano lessons and played in school band. In sixth grade, Birge liked the sound of the French horn and began serious study of the instrument. The local school district had a strong music program, and Birge knew many kids who took further lessons at the University of Michigan or with people from the Detroit Symphony.

After his first year of high school, however, Birge’s family relocated to South Bend, Ind. Inspired by a summer camp he attended in northern Michigan, Birge enrolled at the prestigious Interlochen Arts Academy boarding school. (Classical MPR host Alison Young also attended Interlochen, though not at the same time as Birge.) “I was very, very lucky to go there,” Birge says. “It’s almost like going to college, really, except it’s a high school curriculum. You take all kinds of arts classes, not just music.”



Photo by John Nicholson

It was during his music studies in high school and later in college that Birge decided being a professional musician was not quite the lifestyle he desired. He didn’t mind the rehearsal or the discipline, but he was put off by the relentless competition. That’s not to say Birge never played professionally; his French horn skills served him well as a freelance player with the Cincinnati Symphony and Pops Orchestra. “It was very relaxed, and I loved being surrounded by musicians who were teachers and fellow students from music school,” Birge says. “I was happy to be there, and the fact it lasted as long as it did was fantastic.”

By that time, however, Birge’s serious career pursuits involved public radio. His first full-time job was as a recording engineer at National Public Radio in Washington, D.C., but he left that position in 1983 to return to Cincinnati as an on-air host at WGUC. In 1997, he uprooted once more, this time to come to Minnesota Public Radio.

Birge is now the morning voice for Classical MPR listeners all over the state. He always makes it a point to

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stay on top of cultural activities throughout the listening area. “I want to be able to connect with listeners no matter where they are,” he insists.

The essential way to connect with Classical MPR listeners is, naturally, the music. Although Birge understands that listeners may be otherwise busying themselves while listening – that is the nature of radio, after all – he takes care to open the door for listeners to music he finds particularly inspiring. “I like the idea that we’re playing the best music ever written,” he says. “It’s such a gift.”

Birge also enjoys helping listeners discover new recordings and new music. “People think of the radio station as their friend,” he says, “so if I can be that friend who says, ‘Hey, check this out,’ then that’s a good thing.” ◉

Quick NOTES

Carnegie Hall Live celebrates Beethoven

NOV. 16: The new live broadcast series on Classical MPR, *Carnegie Hall Live*, continues with an all-Beethoven program by the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique conducted by **Sir John Eliot Gardiner**. Performance begins at 7 p.m. CT on all Classical MPR stations.



More Thanksgiving Specials

Besides the annual tradition of *Giving Thanks*, two new musical Thanksgiving specials will air on Classical MPR this

year: **A Thanksgiving Celebration with Garrison Keillor**, features the host of *A Prairie Home Companion* welcoming the soloists and choir of VocalEssence for a celebration of Thanksgiving in word and song, *Thursday, Nov. 24, at 4 p.m.*; and on **Thanksgiving with Cantus**, host Alison Young is joined by Cantus, one of America’s best all-male choruses, for singing and storytelling about gratitude and what it is to be thankful. *Thursday, Nov. 24, 5 p.m.*

Gratitude Attitude

Giving Thanks is touching more people than ever on Thanksgiving Day

As the old saw goes, “Necessity is the mother of invention.” Accordingly, necessity gave birth to *Giving Thanks*. “It was just me having to work on Thanksgiving morning,” chuckles Classical MPR’s John Birge.

Birge was a host on Cincinnati public radio station WGUC when he first created what would become *Giving Thanks*, playing music and finding stories to fit the day. When Birge joined Classical MPR in 1997, he realized a bigger audience might enjoy the program. It is now a national holiday special; last year, *Giving Thanks* aired on 301 stations nationwide on Thanksgiving Day.

Giving Thanks includes interviews with guests, and Birge’s mind boggles at the number of poets laureate, Pulitzer Prize-winners and other luminaries who have participated in the show. This year, guests on *Giving Thanks* (9 a.m. and encore at 8 p.m.) are writer and *Wait, Wait ... Don’t Tell Me!* regular Roy Blount, Jr., and writer and film director Nora Ephron.

Music naturally plays a big part, and Birge finds pieces that are about thankfulness or about autumn or the harvest. “And some of them are just pieces that feel like the holiday feels, even though there’s no specific or literal connection to it,” he says. “They just seem to be the right soundtrack.”

What listeners won’t find on *Giving Thanks* are Turkey Day clichés. “This is not a pilgrims and pumpkin pies kind of show,” Birge insists. “It’s much more contemporary. It’s about fall, food and gratitude.”

And because nowadays the show is pre-recorded, Birge can be grateful he no longer needs to work on Thanksgiving morning. ◉

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