

PBS, États-Unis

John Walker

Sous la direction de
Marie-Odile Demay

Coordination éditoriale
Marnie Mariscalchi

Conception graphique
Alex Delagrave

Révision (textes français)
Alex Delagrave

Révision (textes anglais)
Aleksander Janicki

Référence bibliographique

Demay, Marie-Odile (dir.). *Mémoires de programmeurs d'arts de la scène à la télévision*. Montréal : CinéMédias, 2025, collection « Écrans partagés ». <https://doi.org/10.62212/1866/41581>

Dépôt légal

Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec,
Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2025
ISBN 978-2-925376-22-4 (PDF)

Mention de droits pour les textes

© CinéMédias, 2025. Certains droits réservés. Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International



Retranscription des entretiens

Les propos rapportés dans ce livre sont retranscrits dans leur langue originale. De plus, ils ont été édités afin d'en faciliter la lecture, avec l'accord des personnes concernées.

Mention d'appui financier

cinEXmedia est en partie financé par le Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada.



Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Canada

Entretien avec John Walker

Senior Producer, *Great Performances*, WNET PBS

21 octobre 2019

Marie-Odile Demay >

John Walker, you're senior producer of *Great Performances*, the performing arts series on public television in the United States. Could you tell me about what brought you to do this job?

John Walker >

After college I was an assistant to the director of serious music for Boosey & Hawkes, a British classical music label. After that, I became the music associate for Leonard Bernstein for about ten years. In 1980, I became an associate producer at CBS where I was part of the team that launched the CBS Arts cable network that failed after three years. I started working for the public television station WNET in New York City on July 4, 1983, and I'm still there today.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Can you explain how the PBS member stations work in relation to the public television network?

John Walker >

PBS is composed of member stations, of which the largest member station in the system is called THIRTEEN that covers New York. THIRTEEN is part of WNET public television station, situated in Newark, that controls the Long Island network and the New Jersey network. I work for Thirteen Productions in Delaware, which is headquartered in New York City, where I oversee commissioning for the performing arts series *Great Performances* for the whole network.

Marie-Odile Demay >

I understand that PBS is public-funded, mainly through fundraising. I know that *Great Performances* shows are very costly to produce. How are they funded?

John Walker >

We get several million dollars a year from PBS, but that's not nearly enough money for *Great Performances* programs that are, indeed, very expensive to produce. So the station THIRTEEN goes out and raises money for us for approximately 10 to 12 M\$ a year. All in all, we manage to produce about two shows a month to be broadcast on the main channel.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Do you sometimes embark on co-productions with other foreign channels?

John Walker >

We always partner with an organization that will share the costs with us. For instance, we agreed to take a Rolex sponsorship on the Vienna New Year's concert. So Rolex was given visibility on PBS and a shared copyright on the program. Sometimes, the partner might be the theater, the orchestra or the opera itself, which funds the production. We usually put some public television funds and resources into the program, and the partner institution will find benefactors. It is therefore more like a commercial investment than a television co-production, where a broadcaster shares its costs and rights with another to produce a program.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Could you tell me more about what you are commissioning for *Great Performances*?

John Walker >

It can be many things that bring entertainment and performing arts together. It presents a diverse programming portfolio of classical music, opera, popular song, musical theater, dance, drama, and performance documentaries. However, the first mandate is that we are to work with American arts institutions, like the Metropolitan Opera, the New York City Ballet or the Lyric Opera of Chicago. Our first task is to produce those shows. Once we've got that covered, we can look abroad, in Europe or Asia, for co-production possibilities. For example, every year, since 2009, we broadcast the Vienna Philharmonic Summer Night Concert. But the bulk of our money and time goes into trying to put American arts institutions on television.

Marie-Odile Demay >

What would be a typical production on PBS's *Great Performances*?

John Walker >

Every production is different. For instance, we've been broadcasting the majority of the Metropolitan Opera since the inception of our performing arts programming on PBS in 1972 and now, their *The Met: Live in HD* productions. We take a second window two or three months after the cinema live cast. In this case, we don't broadcast the live event but replay a slightly reedited version of the live transmission in cinemas. In other words, *The Met: Live in HD* director will fix in the editing room the places where it went wrong in the live production. It's not necessary for us, but since they do it for the DVD release, we broadcast this version. Those productions will go prime time on *Great Performances* on Saturdays or Sunday afternoons according to the station.

When Thirteen Productions produces a performing arts program, we usually rehearse one production with cameras and tape two performances. We edit those two together into a single program. Usually, it'll be on the air whenever PBS schedules it.

Marie-Odile Demay >

You choose your content for an American audience, obviously. What are your criteria? What are you looking for in a show to be captured and broadcast on *Great Performances*, apart from being an American artist or institution?

John Walker >

First, we have these content-related scales that help us create well-rounded seasons. For instance, we try to avoid having more than two classical ballets in a season. The choice of title depends on a number of factors. I've established long time relationships with the major arts institutions in the US, so we have a good understanding of what they want to put forward and how they want to be perceived. I think this is important. It's not only about how we at PBS want to be seen. We're there to support the outreach activities of American arts institutions. We discuss why they feel one production should be broadcast more than another

On the other hand, we also need to choose programs that will appeal to our viewers. Often, it's a star that will bring a viewer to it. You don't go into watching *Downton Abbey* with the mindset of "What can I expect?". With *Great Performances*, every performing arts program of the series is a singular one that needs to be driven by a recognizable element. Putting a star front and center is the simplest way to attract an audience. Unfortunately, there aren't many stars in classical music today who can do that with the American audience. What works well for PBS are shows that aren't necessarily typical classical music, like Broadway musicals. It's important to remember that musicals are a big part of American culture. So, the musical itself is the star and appeals to a very large audience.

Marie-Odile Demay >

In a way PBS, and *Great Performances* in particular, could be considered a media platform for American arts institutions and artists. Has that been the case since the beginning of public television in the US?

John Walker >

In the early stages of American television and the early 1960s, Congress with the Ford Foundation established a system of educational public television around the country, the National Educational Television confederation of independent local stations. PBS is derived from this first organization and upholds the initial spirit of showcasing American, local institutions on television. That could be orchestras, ballets, theater and opera companies, and museums and local artists. Some of those stations with insufficient financial support relied on other well-endowed major stations like in Boston, New York and Los Angeles. These stations created production entities that provided content to be syndicated through the whole network of stations. This system came before the Public Broadcasting System, or PBS. Congress made PBS the new National Educational Television in 1972. PBS is both radio and television. The series started in 1972 when ExxonMobil, with the extended support of the Rockefeller Foundation, wanted to record for television the ballets of George Balanchine and they wanted to give visibility to Leonard Bernstein. In 1974, Exxon gave 10 M\$ a year to set up the performing arts programming we now call *Great Performances*, based in New York.

Meanwhile, in 1971, the WGBH station in Boston, with the support of the Mobil Oil Corporation, launched a drama anthology series called *Masterpiece*, initially known as *Masterpiece Theatre*. Today's high-end filmed dramas, like *Downton Abbey*, are a direct descendant of that initiative

and are still scheduled in *Masterpiece* on PBS. These expansive productions generally came as co-productions with entities in the United Kingdom, mainly with the BBC. In the meantime, *Great Performances* was also doing a lot of drama, captured live on location.

This is how it all really started here, and there hasn't been too much of a change since the original concept. We lost Exxon and all corporate support probably about fifteen years ago. But philanthropists and private individuals stepped up and filled that void. With *Masterpiece*, *Great Performances* is one of the oldest enduring broadcast series now on PBS.

Marie-Odile Demay >

So if I were to compare a *Great Performances* concert from 1976 with one from last year, I wouldn't notice much of a difference except for the 4:3 ratio.

John Walker >

You're right. The spirit and format of *Great Performances* have remained consistent. And over time, PBS has also built a tradition of performing arts programs with emblematic artists that audiences have come to expect and demand. For example, *Great Performances* have done a dozen broadcasts with American conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein, and after his death, we are still regularly celebrating his work. And so, on December 25, 1974, *Great Performances* did *Bernstein at Tanglewood*, and in 2018, we celebrated his 100th anniversary, also in Tanglewood.

We started, thirty five years ago, the tradition of the Vienna Philharmonic's New Year's Concert, which our viewers love. The Vienna Philharmonic puts on an annual New Year's concert that features waltzes, polkas, mazurkas, and marches, including the well-known *The Blue Danube* by Johann Strauss and music by Mozart. It's been broadcast live on the radio and TV since the 1950s, and the TV broadcast is enhanced with ballet performances. It is a beautiful, very cheerful program, set in the stunning Golden Hall concert venue in Vienna.

Many public TV stations around the world buy the rights to the live broadcast, and we've been airing a version of it on January 1 every year since 1985. At first, we just used the European feed, but it was so far from our American culture that we decided to make our own version of it. Unlike other countries, we decided to include a host to introduce and accompany the program. We started with Walter Cronkite, who was really well-known in the US at the time, and then Julie Andrews and later Hugh Bonneville. We created a program that people could relate to, and now it's a New Year's tradition on PBS. It's become a bit of an American tradition, like our Festival of Broadway shows, where we air a different Broadway show every week in November.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Regarding this New Year's concert, is there a unique version for each broadcaster that buys the rights? Are they using your version with your host?

John Walker >

No, we have our own version, and the other channels directly broadcast the feed straight from Austrian television. The live concert in Vienna is at 11:00 in the morning, which is six hours earlier than here in New York. We broadcast the concert in the afternoon which gives us several hours to remix a whole new show adapted for the American market. When Julie Andrews was the host, the BBC wanted to take our version, but it made their broadcast too late, so it never worked out.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Over the years you've worked on *Great Performances*, can you think of a turning point in how public TV has presented performing arts programs?

John Walker >

There are so many programs I could mention, for different reasons. Of course, all the programs we did with Leonard Bernstein were moments of exception. But one stands out from my early years at PBS. We did this African-American musical version of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, *The Gospel at Colonus*, in 1985. We filmed this Broadway piece in Philadelphia with some of the most incredible gospel singers and blues stars at the time. The classical tragedy took on a whole new meaning when we did it in the gospel style. It was an incredible piece.