

Don't Stop the Bach! Static Breaking Up Slick New WNYC-FM

by [Ian Blecher](#)

The passionate depressives who spin classical music on WNYC-FM are queasier than usual these days. When the station's transmitter went down with the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, WNYC management knitted up its two schedules—a talk-heavy slate of programming on the AM frequency (820 kHz) and a classical-music-heavy lineup on the FM dial (93.9 MHz). And suddenly the FM D.J.'s, who had been broadcasting Beethoven, Berlioz and Glass 18 hours a day, were crushed into a mere four hours—from 8 p.m. to midnight—on the combined schedule.

Now, four months later, although engineers say WNYC has regained its ability to broadcast on both frequencies, management has kept the classical-music schedule to its new hours. Why? WNYC is a new station, and its management has new priorities.

“I have no clue what's going to happen,” said John Schaefer, who hosts *New Sounds* daily from 11 p.m. to midnight. “I know we'll have classical music,” he said, but “the morning music and the midday music shows, they're basically gone.”

‘I always thought of WNYC as a cause. Laura [Walker] thinks it's a business.’—Mary Daly, former consultant to WNYC

The 77-year-old WNYC, a radio holdover from a municipally idealistic age, is now, in the tenor of the times, privatizing. It has just about completed its six-year transformation from New York's blaring civil servant of the air to slick, independent NPR clone, muffling shows like *Morning Music* with Steve Post and *Midday Music* with Margaret Juntwait in favor of the garrulous transcontinental yentas *Satellite Sisters* and Kurt Andersen's hip midlifer's culture fest, *Studio 360*.

It's a far cry from *The John Hour*, the 1979 program ordered by Mayor Koch on which the names of men convicted of soliciting local prostitutes were read, or, of course, Mayor La Guardia reading *Little Orphan Annie* on the air during the 1945 newspaper deliverymen's strike.

But the numbers look good. Over the last five years, the mostly self-sufficient \$22-million-a-year broadcasting enterprise has increased its paying membership by close to 50 percent and its audience by 28 percent, according to station management.

"I think it's a case study in privatization," said Eduardo Mestre, the chairman of the board of directors of WNYC. "And it's been a real success."

But beneath the rosy statistics, sources at the station say, there's a continuing conflict between WNYC's \$340,000-a-year chief executive, Laura Walker, and many of her underlings, especially the rumpled professoriate of old producers, programmers and on-air personalities who are not happy with the station's new direction. Some have left; others think they can outlast the slick management, hoisting their gems: *New York Works*, audio profiles of people with weird jobs; *New York & Co.*, in which the irascible Leonard Lopate converses with his culture heroes; and Mr. Schaefer's *New Sounds*.

Generally, the cardinal rule of radio programming is that every time you switch formats, you lose listeners. The city's powerhouse stations, WABC-AM 770 and WQHT Hot-97 FM, specialize in one mind-numbing genre, like talk or R&B. High-placed sources at WNYC say that Ms. Walker wants to take the station in a similar direction and convert it to a unified all-talk format.

"I wouldn't do things the way they're doing it right now; that's why I left," said Mary Daly, who has a 28-year history with the station. Ms. Daly started out at WNYC in 1975 as an assistant to then-station manager Mary Nichols. Until four years ago, she worked as a consultant to the station on, ironically, its fund-raising

campaign to gain independence from the city.

Ms. Daly isn't the only one to decamp from WNYC. Station sources cite a number of key departures. Most recently, chief operating officer Betsy Gardella resigned abruptly the day before WNYC made its last payment to the city and gained financial and administrative independence. Arthur Cohen, the vice president for programming, left three years ago. Linda Morgan, the longtime director of development, left a year and a half ago. Newer hires like Mark MacDonald, the news director, his assistant Kevin Beesley and the second-ranking accountant, Joe Majoros, have all resigned in recent months. "Laura has not been able to get along with strong people below her," said one of her underlings.

Ms. Daly attributes the friction to Ms. Walker's generational status. At 44, she's too young to remember the 60's, when public radio came of age. "She's 10 years younger than me," Ms. Daly said, "and I think something important happened in those 10 years. She missed out on something ... I don't know. I always thought of WNYC as a cause. Laura thinks it's a business."

Ms. Walker has sought out advertisers (which are called "underwriters" in the NPR lexicon), "partnered" with for-profit companies and orchestrated company retreats. In 2000, the station spent almost \$1 million on consultants, an extravagance that was unheard of before Ms. Walker arrived in December of 1995. The station's C.E.O. also arranged to trade ad spots for an account at David Bouley's Danube restaurant, so management would have a nice place to entertain corporate clients.

Ms. Walker has not brought NPR chic to WNYC for cheap. In 1994, his last year as president, Tom Morgan—who ran the station in the early 1990's—earned an estimated \$85,000. "I'm not thrilled about the implication that when we were owned by the city, we were managed by the city, we were influenced by the city—and now we don't have that difficulty," said Mr. Morgan. "There wasn't anything I was afraid to do because I was working for the city."

But Ms. Walker made more than \$340,000 in 2000, the last year for which statistics are available. That's almost 50 percent more than Channel 13 president Bill Baker made that year, though Channel 13's budget is nearly 10 times larger than WNYC's. In addition, Ms. Walker brought in a cabinet of vice presidents at comparable salaries. Ms. Gardella made \$170,000 in 2000, and four other administrators earned between \$142,000 and \$285,000.

In reply to the charge that Ms. Walker and her V.P.'s are overpaid, Mr. Morgan—now a station trustee—said, “I don’t know that we’re sacrificing quality because of salaries.”

“Whenever there’s change at an organization, there’s pining for the old days,” Mr. Mestre said.

At the station, Ms. Walker is seen as more of a big-picture manager. She is often out of the office, networking and partnering. “She never listens to her own station!” one staffer said. That’s why Ms. Gardella’s departure has fueled so much discussion. She did the quotidian jobs Ms. Walker evidently eschews: She listened to all the shows, solved problems and generally handled the day-to-day business.

Ms. Walker and Ms. Gardella seemed to complement each other nicely. They both live in Brooklyn Heights; they’re both raising young children; they both like *Satellite Sisters*. They were seen laughing and smiling together as recently as the Dupont Awards for broadcasting excellence at Columbia University on Jan. 16. And both parties insist Ms. Gardella’s resignation was amicable. “I’ve decided to leave WNYC to spend more time with my family and to take a short sabbatical before moving on to the next chapter of my professional career,” Ms. Gardella wrote in an e-mail. She didn’t return calls.

Ms. Walker also cited Ms. Gardella’s personal reasons. “I’m sorry to see her go,” she said. “We have shared a vision for WNYC.”

But station insiders said the two executives rankled each other privately. They said that sometimes Ms. Walker would sit in her office crying after fights with Ms. Gardella.

Some station sources contended that Ms. Gardella coveted Ms. Walker’s job. Ms. Daly recounted that when Ms. Gardella called to say she was leaving, “she said she’d reached the point where she was ready to do something else; she was ready to be the No. 1 and not the No. 2.” At 50, Ms. Gardella was simply too old to wait around for Ms. Walker to leave.

That’s why, according to another source at the station, Ms. Gardella’s departure may have been precipitated by Ms. Walker’s recent contract extension, which guarantees that she will run the station for at least the next five years. A top board member denied any new contractual negotiations—but according to one source

close to the situation, many board members are not even aware of Ms. Walker's *present* salary, let alone the status of her contract.

Despite WNYC's new corporate culture, staffers said the decaying relationship between Ms. Walker and Ms. Gardella is emblematic of the tortured way in which Ms. Walker makes decisions. Where most executives would have eliminated any challenges to their leadership, Ms. Walker wouldn't—or couldn't—get rid of hers. At one point, she allegedly retained a mediator to help her and Ms. Gardella work through their problems. "It was the equivalent of a marriage counselor," said a source at WNYC. "But that wasn't anything special; they hire consultants for everything."

One area where Ms. Walker has not been afraid to exercise her influence is programming. Station sources said that she has invested both station money and effort in three shows she created, each of which is now broadcast nationally on NPR: *The Next Big Thing* with Dean Olsher, Mr. Andersen's *Studio 360* and *Satellite Sisters* with the five irrepressible Dolan girls. Mr. Olsher's show covers cultural trends, with segments like "What are we saying in our love letters?" and "Can you make these five sounds into a story?" Mr. Andersen's show is a kind of radio throwback to Alistair Cooke's *Omnibus*, averaging 103,000 New York listeners. For a recent show, he said on his Web site, "We'll ... find the beginnings of 'lifestyle' marketing in Russel Wright's sleek and modern dinnerware."

Most controversial is *Satellite Sisters*, featuring five viragos burbling about lower middle aged, upper-middle-class life. The show reportedly does well with its target demographic, but many on the staff have come to hate it. Some see a conflict of interest: One of the sisters, Liz, arranged a \$5 million grant from Nike to the Children's Television Workshop when Ms. Walker worked there. Some hate it simply because they hate Ms. Walker.

"It's Laura Walker in radio-show form," one producer said. Another producer collects nasty letters from listeners about it. He has more than 50 so far. "Satellite Sisters' ... is beneath you. It's a bunch of rich, silly women gossiping about their favorite makeup or what a hard time their having with their pathetic lives [sic]," one listener wrote. "Don't be surprised if one day WNYC really goes public," wrote another. "It can spin off its programming into a for-profit corporation. Then Laura Walker ... will make handsome stock options Beware people! This station is for sale, and this time it won't be Giuliani who will be doing the selling."

So much invective about the show hit the WNYC Web site that the Webmaster posted a “reminder” that “vulgar or overly personal attacks are not welcome.” Nevertheless, staff members said Ms. Walker invested millions in developing *Satellite Sisters* and hawking their book, *Satellite Sisters’ Uncommon Senses*. The sisters had some of the first digital studio equipment in the station; they got priority for studio time, and other WNYC hosts—like Brian Lehrer—were asked to interview them on their shows. In the show’s defense, Emma Dunch, a spokeswoman for the station, noted that most of the show’s critics are men—“women love it,” she said. But Jay Kernis, a senior vice president at NPR, said, “Men sort of like it and women sort of don’t like it.”

Satellite Sisters and its ilk have taken the place of less polished shows like Mr. Post’s *Morning Music*. Mr. Post—who never went to college and practically flunked high school—came to WNYC-FM from the free-form WBAI to play classical music and deliver the news. He usually took a leftist slant, and always a dyspeptic one. “*The New York Times* isn’t the paper of record,” he once said on the air. “It’s the paper with a record!” Mr. Post was once nearly fired by the late Mary Perot Nichols for making fun of a public-service announcement about Ed Koch. Later, she became one of his strongest supporters.

When Ms. Walker took over, it was said she wanted Mr. Post gone. On one of her first days as C.E.O., Ms. Walker called Mr. Post into her office to introduce herself. During that meeting, she allegedly said to him, “I don’t like your sense of humor. I don’t get it. I don’t get your show.” Ms. Walker tells a different story:

“The idiosyncrasies of our hosts are very important to us as we go forward,” she said. She also said she likes Mr. Post very much. But, as she did with Ms. Gardella, Ms. Walker seems to be agonizing over what to do with him. She hasn’t fired him; she simply never signed a contract with him, and never gave him a raise beyond cost-of-living adjustments (his salary, according to sources, is around \$90,000 a year).

In 1996, after holding focus groups and talking to consultants, Ms. Walker chopped the first hour off Mr. Post’s show, which ran from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. Then, in June, Mr. Post had to take some time off because of lung cancer. Until days ago, a note on the station’s Web site said, “Steve Post continues to be out on medical leave. We are not making any on-air announcements or informational updates about his condition, at the request of Mr. Post’s family.” Mr. Post requested that the note be

removed. “My health is fine,” he said. “I had surgery, I’ve recuperated fully. I was scheduled to go back to work in October—I would have, but then the transmitter was destroyed.” He also said, “My family never made any requests at all.”

For now, Mr. Post is still getting paid, but he fears he may never get his show back.

He isn’t alone. On Jan. 23, Mr. Post’s colleagues in the music department began circulating an anonymous manifesto under the headline, “We unanimously agree that WNYC-FM should return to the pre-9/11 proportions of music to news. We believe decisions regarding the programming schedule should not be based on ratings alone “ The D.J.’s are demanding a “music program schedule”—which has not been created days before it would go into effect—and, in general, a “commitment of resources for the music department.” They also want a music coordinator.

In a Jan. 23 memo, Ms. Walker delegated the task of planning for the station’s classical music to Phil Redo, the vice president of strategic marketing.

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