



BACKSPIN Mark Gibbs

Nachruf for DRM

About 20 years ago I went to the Proms, a yearly event at Albert Hall in London where a fairly eclectic selection of music (mainly classical) is performed. That year there was the world premiere of a piece of amazing music I now know is called “Nachruf for Strings” by a Norwegian composer (“nachruf,” I am told, means “obituary” in Norwegian).

I remembered the piece a few days ago and e-mailed the Norwegian Society of Composers to see if I could learn more. In 24 hours I got a reply from a very helpful gentleman named Thorgrim, who asked another chap named Torkild, who came up not only with the correct name of the piece but also the composer’s name, Arne Nordheim, and a Web site where I could purchase it!

The site for acquiring this gem is Norsk Komponist Forening (www.nwdocfinder.com/9230), a showcase for Norwegian music that is varied and prolific. Thus it was that I found there all 7 minutes and 28 seconds of “Nachruf for Strings” for the princely sum of 13.50 Kroner (about \$2.24).

I clicked on the “Buy” icon and got “We’re sorry . . . Your PC does not seem to be configured to handle encrypted WMA files.” Allow me to translate: “We’re sorry, but we’re using Microsoft Digital Rights Management (DRM), which

requires Internet Explorer, which you apparently aren’t using, so we can’t help you.”

They were right: I use Firefox. The requirement for IE was irritating but not a real problem. I ran up IE and found the track, added it to my basket, and then found out they wouldn’t accept charges less than 35Nkr (\$5.81). OK, I found another Nordheim composition, so I was over the minimum and completed the purchase.

After downloading the tracks, I tried to play them in Windows Media Player (WMP) and got a warning dialog. But the dialog was in Norwegian and, as you might guess, my Norwegian is a little, er, nonexistent. But there was a link to click on. This gave me another warning.

I discovered there is a bug in Microsoft’s Windows Media Player 11. The support document titled “BUG: You may be redirected to a Web page when you try to play Windows Media DRM protected content after you upgrade to Windows Media Player 11 or to Windows Vista” (www.nwdocfinder.com/9231), and dated Feb. 7, offered a way to address the problem. So I downloaded a patch, installed it, restarted WMP and voilà! WMP acquired the licenses and there it was, in all its glory, the piece of music I had heard 20 years before. And it was glorious.

What do I do after luxuriated in the strains of “Nachruf for Strings”? I burned a CD and ripped it back to an MP3, so I could play it on my iPod because, guess what? I don’t

own a device that plays protected WMAs!

What was my “takeaway” from this saga? First, the folks at Norsk Komponist Forening, in common with many other Web sites, have next to no idea about the value of a positive customer experience. This is apparent because they obviously haven’t actually tested the purchase and download process to see if it actually works for everyone. If they had, they would know that it can be user friendly in the same way that a cornered rat is user friendly.

Second, Microsoft’s patching is hardly comprehensive; how could the company omit a patch that renders their DRM unusable?

Third, Microsoft’s DRM is incredibly poorly thought out if it can fail like that. Pathetic is the term that comes to mind.

Fourth, we have yet another example of how DRM in general — and for music in particular — doesn’t help sell content. If I had been a naive user, I would have probably just given up.

I pray that I will never have to find another piece of Norwegian music. My next challenge may be some amazing Mongolian hip hop I heard, I think, on NPR a few months ago. I wonder how hard getting that will be . . .

PS. A big “Tusen takk” to Thorgrim and Torkild. Send your music selections to backspin@gibbs.com.



NETBUZZ News, insights and oddities

How to avoid hiring an American

Paul McNamara

Just a suggestion: Watch the video I posted to Buzzblog last week and keep it in mind the next time you hear a high-tech industry titan such as Bill Gates com-

plain that he simply cannot find qualified American employees, therefore the country needs more H-1B visas.

You can access it at www.nwdocfinder.com/9228.

In the video you will see a panel discussion that could be a sit-down with “the families” on “The Sopranos,” only instead of talking about the nitty-gritty of organized crime these lawyers are discussing the ins and outs of helping employers side-step immigration law.

What’s particularly striking is how matter-of-fact they are about dishing this advice. The objective, says Lawrence Lebowitz, vice president of marketing at Cohen & Grigsby, couldn’t be more straightforward: “Our goal is clearly not to find a qualified U.S. worker . . . our objective is to get this person a green card,” Lebowitz tells his conference audience.

And how does an employer go about fulfilling that objective in light of its legal obligation to first search for a qualified American? It’s all about where you search, he says.

“Clearly we are not going to find a place where the applicants are most numerous, we’re going to find a place where — again we’re complying with the law — [we’re] hoping and likely not to find qualified worker applicants,” Lebowitz says.

And if despite looking in all the wrong places a gem of an American candidate pops up anyway? This may be an unfortunate turn of events, but it, too, can be corrected.

“If someone looks like they are very qualified, if necessary schedule an interview; go through the whole process to find a legal basis to disqualify them,” he says.

That’s just a taste; there are other precious moments on the video.

By the way, Lebowitz prefaced that first remark — the one about the objective being “not to find a qualified U.S. worker” — by saying, “this may sound funny.”

Don’t know about anyone else, but I didn’t even crack a smile. It doesn’t sound funny

(and where’s Joe Pesci when you need him?). It sounds like it ought to be illegal. At the very least, it sounds like Congress should be tightening the screws on current law before increasing the number of H-1Bs.

Time stands still on the iPhone

I presume you’re all primed and ready to buy your iPhones, right?

Well, that a few of you will manage to resist the hype is no surprise. But there was a lingering iPhone-related mystery — at least it was lingering late last week — that deserves addressing.

What’s up with this 9:42 fascination? I first noticed it in a post on Digg: “In every iPhone ad the time is 9:42. In every iPhone demo it is 9:42. In every iPhone picture on Apple’s site it is 9:42. The iPhone was first announced during the Macworld keynote at 9:42. Why 9:42?”

Not having a good answer to the question myself, I fell back on my three decades of experience as a journalist and put the question to Apple’s public relations department. An Apple spokesperson said she didn’t know but would “try to find an answer.”

In the meantime, we’re left to speculate, or, if you happen to know, educate.

My guesses: There is no reason. The Apple spokesperson offered that as a possibility, saying, “it might be random.”

The time 9:42 could be simply convention: I know that photos predating digital clocks always had their hands posed a certain way for the sake of aesthetics.

Or, and this is my most wild guess, it could be a security measure: If all of the official promotional materials for iPhone carry the time 9:42 then anything with any other time would have to be a fraud.

My favorite possibility came from a Digg reader who offered this potential connection between 9:42 and The Phone: “The actual price will be \$942”

Feel free to offer your own theory. The address is buzz@nww.com.