Website Case Study: San Francisco Symphony  
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www.sfsymphony.org

Background
The San Francisco Symphony (SFS) is one of the premier orchestras in the United States and the world. The symphony was founded after the 1906 earthquake and held its inaugural season in 1911 and 1912. A series of prominent music directors have helped establish and raise the organization's musical standard. The symphony has a reputation for innovation and is on the cutting edge in musical programming, educational programs, and community outreach. The SFS was the first symphonic ensemble heard in regular American radio broadcasts. Most recently, music director Michael Tilson Thomas has continued this tradition of innovation with the American Mavericks and other festivals; the Keeping Score website, PBS, and radio shows; and the Great Performances series.

Overall
The SFS website if functional, but not very user friendly. It is very large and contains a large amount of information and repetition, making it difficult to focus and find information. The navigation system makes it more difficult, with multiple navigation areas on each page. The information on the pages is not aligned or well laid out. The one positive feature of the page is the event calendar and ticketing system, featured to the right of every page. Overall, the site should be cleaner and clearer. It is especially disappointing for an organization with the reputation and resources of the SFS.

Design and Navigation
The site has a deep red background with white sans serif fonts for the titles. The content section of the page is white with both serif and sans serif fonts in black, grey, and orange. There is a column to the right of the content area that includes a calendar and a “support your symphony” donate plug. This section is tan with black,
orange, and yellow colors as well as serif and sans serif font. The distinct differences of these three sections reveal the lack of design and information continuity pervasive throughout the site.

The information within this disparate structure is more confusing. The top banner does not have a clear hierarchy of information. The SFS logo and name are in the top left of the screen and some small navigation options are in the top right of the screen. A rotating picture feature of upcoming events dwarfs all of this. This featured picture is annoyingly large and is not aligned with the rest of the website. The picture is also surrounded by titles, captions, and critic quotes that further compete for the viewer’s attention.

The main navigation bar is below this top banner, with a button for each sub-navigation page. When your mouse hovers over one of these buttons, an orange banner pops up directly above the bar. This banner repeats name of the section and adds a one-line description. I find this feature repetitive and unnecessary. Directly below this navigation bar is another banner with featured events. This banner is made up of three square pictures. When your mouse hovers over the picture, it gets larger and a white description banner covers the bottom half of the picture. I am not sure why the site has two different featured events banners on the main page, especially when the same featured event and picture is on both banners (Zubin Mehta and the Israeli Philharmonic). It continues the theme of repetition and reveals a lack of overall content alignment.

This site has six main sub-navigation pages. The tan calendar column to the right of the website remains constant throughout all pages, but the content below the calendar changes. However, the information below the calendar is hardly noticeable due to its color scheme and location. These sub-navigation pages have their own navigation bar and further sub-pages. The sub-navigation bar is a column to the left of the window, which does not align with the main navigation bar across the top. Additionally, the content of each main sub-navigation page is essentially another
glorified navigation column. It is a list of the same titles of the sub-navigation column, but with a short blurb and picture added.

There is a lot of information on the SFS website. In addition to the six main sub-navigation, there are over 50 further sub-pages as well as the symphony store, events calendar, and ticketing areas of the website. Each page is full of heavy amounts of text and pictures. The organization of this information is often confusing. For example, the four content headers on the main page are not aligned and have no hierarchy of information. A lot of the information throughout the website pages is repetitive. For example, the History page and the SFS Fact Sheet page provide the viewer with the exact same information. Additionally, there is a lack of design continuity. For example, the banner picture of the first two sub-navigation pages is essentially the same picture.

**Prescription**

Despite the critical comments above, the SFS website is usable. It is possible to find desired information, learn about the organization, and easily purchase tickets directly on the site. However, it takes much longer than it should to find information and complete tasks. I would recommend three things to improve the website. First, streamline the site navigation. Sub-pages should be combined where possible and all navigation should be found in one section of the site. Second, there should be better alignment of information on the page. Related information should be clearly grouped together along clean sight lines. Important information should larger and more distinct than other information. Finally and most importantly, the website need a complete design overhaul. There should be fewer pop-ups, features, and gimmicks in exchange for one main theme, one main navigation area, and continuity among all pages and features of the website.