Never Listen to Céline? Radio Meter Begs to Differ

By STEPHANIE CLIFFORD

American men have a naughty little secret. Sometimes, they like to relax with a little Céline Dion. Professed classical music fans have one, too: as it turns out, they don’t tune into classical radio nearly as much as they claim.

These are two of many findings shaking up the radio industry as it converts from measuring ratings through surveys to monitoring listeners electronically using so-called Portable People Meters.

As radio executives are discovering, what people say they do and what they actually do is different — especially where “My Heart Will Go On” is concerned.

That more men are mellowing out to Air Supply than are willing to admit it is a curious discovery, but the new system has serious repercussions, especially for classical radio. When 12 major areas, including New York and Los Angeles, switched to the system last year, classical radio’s market share fell 10.7 percent in those areas, a significant drop, according to a study by Research Director, a ratings consultancy.

The numbers are part of what an industry consultant, Marc Hand, calls “a smorgasbord of issues” facing commercial classical music stations. In the last year, major commercial stations including WCRB in Boston and WQXR in New York were sold to public radio operators, while KFUO in St. Louis was sold to a Christian broadcaster. (WQXR was owned by The New York Times Company.) There are now only about 20 commercial classical stations in the country, said Mr. Hand, the managing director of Public Radio Capital, which advises nonprofit stations on acquisitions.

The decline has concerned classical fans, who see radio as an important civilizing force.

“It’s education but also expanding horizons, understanding the existence of a whole host of art forms that are extremely related and important to our cultural history,” Joseph W. Polisi, president of the Juilliard School, said.

Talk radio, a largely conservative format, turns out to have fewer fans than previously thought. Talk radio’s market share declined 2.6 percent in the study of areas where the meters were used. Talk radio (excluding sports and news) is about 80 percent conservative, says Michael Harrison, publisher of the trade magazine Talkers. He cautioned that the sample size in markets using meters was relatively small.

The new ratings have contributed to other shifts. Mainstream formats like oldies, news and country have fared better.

Meanwhile, smooth jazz has hit a low note. Clear Channel jettisoned such programming from eight of its...
stations after dismal ratings. Some Spanish-language stations’ ratings declined sharply — at Univision’s KLVE in Los Angeles, for example, ratings fell 54 percent in the first quarter of 2009 from the same period the year before, leading it and other broadcasters to testify before Congress on Dec. 2 that the new system is discriminatory.

The television industry had switched from diary entries to metered ratings in 1987 and had seen similarly surprising changes — young men, for instance, watched cartoons much more heavily than they had reported doing, said Gary Holmes, a spokesman for Nielsen. But it took the radio industry almost two decades to catch up.

Since the 1960s Arbitron, the main radio ratings company, has relied on paper diaries. It currently asks about 800,000 people annually to log a week of listening habits. Problems have been numerous: people’s recollection was imperfect, if they listened to a station briefly they could forget it, and they might overstate listening to stations that they felt reflected better taste.

“People tended to look at it almost like an election — they would vote for the things they liked,” said Jaye Albright, an industry consultant with Albright & O’Malley, a radio consultancy.

In 2007, Arbitron formally introduced the Portable People Meter, a pagerlike device that about 57,000 survey participants carried around all day. After introducing the device in 2007 in two cities, Philadelphia and Houston, last year Arbitron moved it to 12 major areas including New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, added 19 more this year and expects most major markets to be measured by the end of 2010.

“Advertisers were demanding it,” said Alton L. Adams, Arbitron’s chief marketing officer.

Now, with a year of data from the early converts, researchers are finding intriguing patterns. Men had been thought to make up 34.7 percent of the soft-rock audience, according to Arbitron Radio Today 2008, based largely on paper entries. This month, Research Director and the publication Inside Radio released their analysis of meter-only cities from July through October, showing men make up 40.1 percent of the total light-rock audience, a jump of 16 percent. “It caught people by surprise,” said Charlie Sislen, president of Research Director.

“It may be a case where men didn’t want to admit they were listening to a light A.C.,” said Greg Ashlock, president and market manager for Los Angeles at Clear Channel, using industry shorthand for adult contemporary, or soft rock. “‘No, I don’t listen to Céline Dion. I’m a sports guy.’”

Some male soft-rock listeners say they simply like the music.

Ezra Feinberg, 33, a psychologist in San Francisco, listens to KOIT, a soft-rock station, on his commute. “One in 10 songs on soft-rock radio resonates, but it really resonates,” he said.

Then there are the unwilling listeners, like Reece Carter, 40, an architectural designer in Roswell, Ga. Mr. Carter dreads driving with his wife in the evening, when she tunes into the love-laden Delilah show on B98.5 “My wife gives me my recommended daily allowance,” he said.

The surprising gender makeup of soft-rock listeners has already shifted some advertising dollars.
“I see it gaining traction with Pontiac, GMC, Dodges,” said Joe Puglise, president and market manager of Clear Channel Radio New York, which owns Lite-FM. However, he said, it was a subtle change. “It’s not like all of a sudden on Lite-FM we’re getting biker bars and Harley-Davidson dealerships,” Mr. Puglise said.

The makeup and size of Arbitron’s sample is an issue for some Hispanic and urban broadcasters, who say metered readings undercount minority audiences and hurt their stations disproportionately. Mr. Adams of Arbitron said the company was responding to concerns by adding more panelists who had cellphones rather than landlines, and investing in in-person coaching to make sure all panel members use the devices correctly.

Whatever the problems with the new system, it is becoming the standard for ratings among advertisers. Researchers say that, in general, niche stations suffer under the meter. Mass stations do well because they have a broad signal and because they are played at businesses and in malls. Niche stations’ fans may not appear as frequently in the metered ratings because of the smaller sample size.

“The meter is sort of making radio more homogenous, because the stations that do best are the mass appeal stations,” Ms. Albright said. That may be another explanation for why men are listening to soft rock.

“There’s no good radio,” said Jason Pontius, 39, a technology executive in Oakland, Calif. “Soft rock radio is like, ‘Am I really listening to this?’ But it’s the best thing that’s on.”