

EPIISODE 061

HOUSTON SYMPHONY

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Jett Butler, FÖDA

AND

Gwen Watkins, Houston Symphony

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to The Follow-up, a weekly podcast that goes in depth into projects recently reviewed on Brand New featuring conversations with the designers, and sometimes their clients, uncovering the context, background and design decisions behind the work.

ARMIN VIT

Hi, this is Armin Vit and welcome to episode number 61 of The Follow-up. We hope you had a good and enjoyable holiday break and are ready to tackle 2023 because, let's face it, otherwise, 2023 will tackle you. So, let's get to it!

This week we are following up on the Houston Symphony, an American orchestra and one of the oldest performing arts organizations in Texas. The orchestra performed in the City Auditorium or the Music Hall before the construction in 1966 of its own building, the Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts, where it can host more than 2,000 people. The Grammy Award-winning Houston Symphony presents more than 130 concerts annually and has recorded under various labels, including Koch International Classics, Naxos, RCA Red Seal, Telarc, Virgin Classics, and, most recently, Dutch recording label Pentatone. With the start of the 2022 – 23 season, Houston Symphony welcomed its newest music director, Juraj Valčuha.

The project, designed by Austin, TX-based FÖDA was posted on Brand New on October 19, 2022. You can pull it up on your browser at bit.ly/bnpodcast061 that is B I T dot L Y slash bnpodcast061, all in lowercase.

This week we are joined by Jett Butler, Chief Creative Officer of FÖDA and Gwen Watkins, Chief Marketing Officer of the Houston Symphony.

In this conversation we get to hear the understandable trepidation of the client going into a rebranding process after the pandemic halted their performances — leaving their budget lacking — and the impending unknown of a new musical director who had yet to start his tenure. Stepping in as a sponsor, through an unexpected answer to the Symphony's RFP, FÖDA proved to be an invaluable partner in this stage of the organization's history, helping them define their position not just amidst other reputable symphonies around the United States but amidst other landmark organizations in Houston across arts, sports, and entertainment with which they have to compete against for the public's time, energy, and money. Among other great topics, we do spend a good amount of time talking about the reference to Houston's highways being represented in the logo and the conclusion is surprisingly interesting.

Now, let's listen in as Bryony follows up with Jett and Gwen.

BRYONY How does one evoke sound? Especially beautiful sound using a visual approach for an iconic cultural institution? That is what we're about to find out today as we get the details on how the Houston Symphony, along with FÖDA did just that. Gwen and Jett, welcome to The Follow-Up.

GWEN Hello. Thanks for having us.

JETT Thank you.

BRYONY If you don't mind taking a minute to just introduce yourselves and who you're representing today so our audience can match your voices to your roles in the project.

GWEN Hi, I'm Gwen Watkins. I'm the Chief Marketing and External Relations Officer for the Houston Symphony. I've been here about four years.

Before that, I had almost eight years with the Museum of Fine Arts, so I'm kind of a lifelong arts lover and arts employee.

BRYONY Wonderful. Jett?

JETT I'm the Founder and the Chief Creative Officer of FÖDA in Austin.

BRYONY It's always important to start with a foundation of what the institution or the client is. The Houston Symphony was established in 1913, and it is one of the oldest performing arts organizations in all of Texas. But if we jump a hundred and something years forward to the present, as you are embarking on a new season, under new leadership of a new Music Director, I have to ask: why rebrand now?

GWEN So it is a really exciting time for the Symphony. We have a new music director. These kinds of leadership changes only happen at an organization like ours, hopefully maybe once a decade or so on average. With it, it always signals sort of a change in the approach that the organization's taking to their mission, the artistry of the orchestra, and with that we felt that it was just a very logical time to rebrand. The previous branding coincided with the centennial of the symphony and a new music director at that time, and was very much tied to where the symphony was in that time—it was about 2010. We have had some growing pains with that logo and didn't feel that it really reflected what we wanted it to reflect on behalf of the organization. So we'd been eager to find a moment to do that, and then when we found our new music director, signed the contracts, got him on board, it just seemed like the perfect opportunity to also make sure that our visual representation of our organization matched the direction we're heading as an organization.

BRYONY To get a better sense can you give us an idea of when this was? a year ago or when did this transition happen and establish the rebrand project?

GWEN Like I said, we've been kind of eager to do this. You know, the way the contracts work for these conductors, they're years out. So we knew

that the contract was ending on our current music director, but we didn't yet know who our new one would be. These processes can take years, you can go years without leadership in place, but we were very lucky to find Juraj Valčuha, and sign with him in July of 2021. As soon as that signature was inked, and the plans were made, and we knew that his first official season would begin in September of 2022. That's pretty much immediately when we started saying, okay, we need to do this. Let's find the right person.

BRYONY That's why I asked timing, because—

GWEN Yeah.

BRYONY —there is so much going on behind the scenes in cultural institutions that sometimes you realize a project started five years ago, <laugh>, you know? <laugh> That kind of thing.

GWEN Yeah.

BRYONY What were you hoping to find in the creative partner that would embark on this journey with who?

GWEN It was really tricky. I felt a lot of pressure to find the right person. Obviously branding—I'm talking to two people who do this, but for us, those of us who don't do this all the time, it's a very daunting project to take on. It's a very emotional and personal project to a lot of people. Our form is humans and so we have all these humans that care deeply about how they're represented. For me it was really important to find obviously a talented designer, a designer who recognizes the need for functionality, but also someone who's sensitive to artists, and respectful of the art form without caricaturizing it, or reducing it too much. The sensitivity and the understanding of the nuance and the importance of what our musicians are doing was really one of the most critical things for us.

BRYONY Jett, how did FÖDA get involved with this project?

JETT We got a call from Gwen <laugh>.

BRYONY That's simple.

JETT <laugh> Yeah, it's very banal. That answer to that question technically, I think it was an email. I think we got an email. Yeah.

BRYONY So how did you find them Gwen?

GWEN You know, I have to give credit to my Senior Designer working here at the time named Melissa. She and I were like, let's just cast a wide net. You know, as you do, you go with all types of firms, individuals. We did research of people who had done work in the arts nonprofit space. We looked beyond Texas, beyond Houston, we did stick with US-based firms, but we looked at a lot of firms. And interviewed people, and got bids, and did all the things you do through this process. And it was just so easy for us to decide on FÖDA because first of all they were really the only ones that I spoke with that I felt confident in that respect for the art form, understanding of the nuance of it, and also a kind of approach that would be a partnership, not so transactional. Like okay, you pay us this, we produce three things, you have a meeting, you pick one of the things and then you move on. They really immerse themselves into the process and care deeply about the result. That made it an easy choice.

BRYONY I see. Jett, what was the main draw for you in responding?

JETT Oh goodness. Well, I mean some backstory, some context is probably useful to answer that question. I studied classical music all the way up until my sophomore year of college. If you'd have caught me at the right moment in time in the late eighties, early nineties, I would've told you, you know, my career was gonna be in music and I veered away from it to design almost at sort of that the last minute. So there's a lifelong love and care for music. I also spent I guess five, six years in Houston growing up. I'm technically not a Texan, I was born in Virginia, but I lived in Houston for high school before going off to college. And so I still have a connection, a bit of an emotional connection to Housto. And getting a note from Gwen and you know, with the

signature line saying the Houston Symphony and talking about design work, I just was immediately sort of giddy, <laugh>, I guess the best word.

BRYONY It spoke to your soul.

JETT Yeah, I mean it's really like, it's a very profound sort of opportunity and we don't get the chance to do as much work in the arts as we want. We do get the opportunity and we've gotten to do some and it's lovely, but we always want to do more of that and it's very much a place that feeds the soul. So, it was a very easy and immediate response when the note came through. You know, we couldn't have been more excited to step into the process with them.

BRYONY And then for both of you, I would like to know what the internal structure was as you proceeded with the rebrand.

JETT Mm-hmm.

BRYONY Who was on the creative slide and Gwen for you, who was on your team? Who were the decision makers? Who were all the players?

GWEN So it was funny, I have to say. I have a Marketing Committee, so a nonprofit we are governed by a board and we have all these committees and transparency, and so I have a Marketing Committee and when I told them I was doing this, they were like, "wow, rebranding is not for the faint of heart". And they were using these kind of like warfare terms, <laugh>. It really freaked me out <laugh>. So I was like, great...

JETT These are rough metaphors.

GWEN Yeah, it was really scary but I thought, you know, it can't be that bad if we do it the right way. We gave a lot of thought into the structure, but on the other hand didn't wanna do a design by committee. I think that's everybody's nightmare and creates the worst results. So we created a small little working group. I will not call it a committee... <laugh>

But we wanted to have voices from all the stakeholders so that when we did roll something out, at least all of those stakeholder groups would feel that they were represented. So we had two musicians, two board members and then two staff myself and our CEO. Through the process Jett and FÖDA can speak on this, but they did a really good job of interviewing people and we had a few discussions as a group about the direction and then Jett, I don't know if you remember, I think there was only one or two points through the process where we brought something to that group. And it was really like the big moment, you know, of here kind of three—

JETT Mm-hmm.

GWEN —concepts and then maybe one more touch point of okay, this is sort of it and we're done. But we tried to not give them too much control over, "I'm approving this, I'm not approving that, let's change the color", you know, the nitty gritty, but more directionally, and that was it.

And so we tried to keep it really tight and the big scary question mark in all of it was the music director <laugh> because we have this new person that we haven't really worked with much and he's based in Europe and he said that he trusted us to create something and that he didn't need to be involved. And so he was not involved, but we showed him the result before we went out with it and he was very happy. And since then, I have to say Jett, I don't know how much I've even gotten to talk to you about it, but every time he's been in town and he sees, like he saw the season brochure...

JETT Right?

GWEN He wears his hat. We've seen photos of him wearing his hat in Italy!

BRYONY <laugh> Nice!

GWEN He and his agent, they just love the branding. They're very proud of it. So it all worked quite well.

JETT That's wonderful.

BRYONY And Jett who was involved on the creative team?

JETT At a certain point it felt like everybody in the studio was working on the project. Myself, of course, Shruthi Balakrishna, our Design Director, Ryan McLaughlin, one of our Senior Designers, A Wörtz, one of our younger designers, Kelsey Walker, one of our designers at the time. And as with any project that we do in the studio, we're fairly unstructured about how the creative process works. We're very focused in the research side of things— homework and field work as we call it—but everyone participates in every aspect of the process. And that's something we've been doing for 20 years now. It doesn't matter how young you are, how new you are, or how experienced you are, everyone works on the research, everyone does homework, everyone does field work, everyone gets to participate in the creative as well. And I don't just mean participate in the sense of someone got to, you know, reset some type on behalf of someone more senior. I mean everyone gets to lay out their big idea and contribute their thoughts to the process. And we tend to believe that anybody in the process can have that big idea. It may sometimes need a little bit more structure or maturity added to it later if it comes from a younger designer, but sometimes it may not. And so we try to keep it very egalitarian during that part of the project and have as much creative input and as much research done collectively as possible.

BRYONY That's a really neat approach and I'm sure your employees really appreciate that opportunity. Now as you've set up your teams, your structure, your approach, you're both excited. What were the key directives or parameters that you set, either before the research or as an outcome of the research, that then directed the creative?

JETT That's an interesting question and there's something very important I think maybe to hover on there and, Gwen is it okay for me to discuss

the nature of how we sort of received the RFP in general and our kind of...

GWEN Sure.

JETT Okay, cool.

GWEN Whatever you would like.

JETT Bryony, I think it's useful to know how we sort of reacted to the RFP itself. It kind of sets the stage for everything else that kind of goes with it. And so when the RFP came and we reviewed it, it was my feeling at the time that—and you have to remember we're only in year two of the pandemic when we're, we're first entering this conversation, everyone's still in masks, some people are vaccinated, some people aren't. And the symphony has taken a real licking <laugh>, you know, on being able to perform. You can't put people in Jones Hall, you know, in a pandemic. And so when the RFP came, it was our feeling that what they needed was definitely important and the rebrand was crucial, but that they were in a pinch, you know, from a resources point of view, et cetera. And so our sort of position was to say, look, instead of us saying yes to this RFP at this fee range, which we don't think will get the project done correctly, we'd rather make a counter proposal which is: why don't we take that fee allocation and hold onto it for the use of assets, and resources, and things that may be needed in the process, and instead let us do the entirety of what the process should constitute that's way over your budget, so that's okay, we can just be a sponsor. And play the role of a sponsor in this process and donate as much of our services as possible.

That's a very counterintuitive approach for the average RFP <laugh>. So it's like, yeah thanks, but you know, we just felt like let's just do it right and money be damned, let's get this right and let's hold onto those resources. That's just an important thing to touch on. I think first, because the next step then for us is, like McGwen mentioned earlier, that idea of having a good partner in the process. We tried

to assert from day one that we will really be a good partner in this process. We're willing to take risk with you, which is you know, atypical for most agencies. But we felt it was important. And then the shaping of that structure from that point forward in terms of team dialogue, interview cycle, everything kind of flowed beautifully from there.

We're able to talk to everybody, you know, we had some huge interview segments but then eventually whittled down to the not-a-committee <laugh> as Gwen calls it, the not-a-committee, the action team and then sort of move through that tiny tight points of that process at the creative and then be able to flare that back out into a big funnel at the end where we're presenting it to the board, we're presenting it to all the stakeholders, we're getting on a Zoom and presenting it back to the entire symphony again. So there was this beautiful sort of bow tie shape to the process, as well. I think that's really magical, and it's to Gwen's credit, and to all the leadership at the symphony that they were willing to do both of those things 'cuz our proposal was counterintuitive and they said yes to that. And the funneling of that process, the bow tie I think is the only way you can really build consensus and get through such an enormous process with so many voices in it, and still have everyone have a chance to be heard, FÖDA and still have the outcome not be compromised.

GWEN It can't be understated that what FÖDA actually did was give us a gift. It is a partnership but it's beyond that. And we certainly, as an organization in the best of times would have struggled to meet the fee amount that this really was worth, especially in the context we were in at that time, it was difficult. But what it means for us is that we can now use this new rebranding to take that step forward and build our audience and build our brand. And so it's a little off topic but I did wanna acknowledge that, and make sure that that's clear, and we are just super grateful that we met them. You know, you hear Jett talk about his background and the fact that we all came together through this, and it all works the way it did is really just sort of miraculous.

BRYONY It was meant to be.

GWEN Yeah.

JETT It feels like it. It's very special.

BRYONY So of all of that input that came into your funnel, what made it to the other side of the bow tie? What was like the essence of what you found in talking to all of the people at the symphony that pushed yourself forward?

JETT This will sound like an evasive answer, it's not meant to be. The first thing you learn in that process is there are deep and profound emotions attached to how each entity sees the symphony, and is attached to the symphony. It's also important to point out that Houston Symphony is one of the top tier performing symphonies in the world. And what I mean by that is that their musicians are paid. This is not not a part-time gig, this is how these folks make their living, and it's an incredible thing to sort of touch and be a part of. So there's a lot of emotion attached to that. There's a lot of care and concern. There's also the cares and the concerns of the stakeholders, of the donor groups, and the sponsors. There's the concerns of the board, there's the concerns of the C-suite, and the marketing team, et cetera. It's a lot.

What we tried to do with all of that input and information was two things. One, have a process that allowed us to say, okay, let's take all of that under consideration yes, but then let's also take a really hard look at how do symphonies and performing arts groups, and then if you want to extend the ring out a little bit more broadly, how do arts groups in general wether they be performing or fine et cetera, how do they represent themselves historically? How do they represent themselves now? How do they represent themselves in Houston? How do they represent themselves globally? And what we wanted to do is sort of build a baseline of understanding together between all of these different entities to say, here's how everyone else sort of represents

themselves historically. And so we wanna carve out a path that sets the Houston Symphony apart, is appropriate for Houston, is somehow tied to the ground in the same way that Jones Hall is as well.

So the differentiation, the sort of the exclusionary exercise of looking at the compsets, here's all these things that we don't want to be, became a big part of the process as well. For us that's one way of being able to absorb all of the input and the information is, rather than to try to say, okay, we're trying to make everybody happy. Our approach is usually to say let's try to share with everyone what we're seeing and how we're seeing it almost as sort of at a clinical level, to go if everyone else has a sans serif stacked lockup with a swooshy sort of symbol next to it on the left, then maybe the approach for us should start without a swooshy looking symbol to the left and an omitting a sans serif approach. So being a little bit more sort of context driven, so that you end up with a vessel that can receive everyone's emotion and desires, and less about asserting a path that has to be ours, but perhaps also trying to assert a path that's trying to please everyone.

The thing I'm trying to dance around saying is you're trying to educate everyone 'cuz that can sound pompous or arrogant and I don't mean tha. But it's always been our experience that if you share context with an organization, or a company, or even just a single individual, you give them a sense of the framework that their brand is going to exist within. It really does paint a picture of the things that it shouldn't be very quickly. Yeah. And then life gets a little easier then to figure out what it should be cuz now we have some rails in the process. So that's part of that answer. And then the other part, you know there's always something that emerges. You find a sort of a North Star moment and for us it was sitting with Leo who's the Chief [Principal] Timpanist and he was one of our first interviews and so it's kind of miraculous.

I think that word's gonna come up a lot <laugh>, but we're sitting outside the hall 'cuz we can't be in it, and we're outdoors at a picnic table sort of setting so that we can all have a safe distance, and be able to take our masks off and see each other while we interview him. And one of the things that came up that he talked about was how you could trace the bloodlines of specific musicians back to the original composers. Whomever performed the first of, you know, Mozart's Concerto X, whatever that might have been, that musician may and likely did teach someone else how that piece piece was meant to be understood. And then that musician taught another one, and another one. There's the sheet music, but there's also the bloodlines that track with this. And despite how much time I've spent with music, I'd never heard that before.

And so we got really caught up with this idea of the connectivity that goes back over time between the moment of piece is written, and how brilliant classical musicians understand it at the present. And then Leo said, you know, "a symphony is sort of like a time machine" and he motions at the building, he's like, this is a time machine. Sruthi and I who were conducting that particular interview were immediately into our notebooks. I was vibrating at that point, I'm sure Sruthi was as well... when we were done and wrapped and Leo walked away and I'm like, "did he just say this building is a time machine?" And she was like, "I think he said this as a time machine". I'm like, oh there's the project. Wow, okay. So now we just need to connect all these ideas across time. The time of the building, the time of the music, the time of the typography that sits on the building, the musical notation, the form, on and on and on and on.

It just became this beautiful sort of notion of how do we connect these things across time and space. And of course that culminates even in the motion, the gestures, and the musicians themselves as they perform, the time that's witnessed as a bow moves across strings,

right? And so you can get as poetic and as esoteric as you want to with tha. We got all the way into all the pockets <laugh> of being poetic and esoteric, and really lost ourselves in the project and listened to generous amounts of classical music while we did so. And it was quite revelatory. A lengthy and wandering answer to a very simple question, but immersion could have been the easiest answer to that. We were extremely immersive at the beginning.

BRYONY Well it's a long winding answer, but it actually makes sense.

JETT Yeah.

BRYONY You can see it in the outcome. You didn't phone it in.

JETT Yeah.

BRYONY You were deeply invested <laugh>. Now...

JETT We were.

BRYONY If we jump ahead into the first presentation of creative, I'm curious to know if that was in-person, or if that was online? And if you came in with this one idea or three routes based on the one idea, three different ones? And then Gwen, how was that presentation received?

JETT Technically the first presentation we gave was our review and our summations of the research itself. And so footnote, that was about five, 600 pages of data collected between the interviews, demography, comp sets, you name it. So that was our first presentation. And then the second one was the full creative, and we came with three fully-formed ideas. Thoroughly comped out, we did posters, hung them on easels, we had some of the material comped in t-shirts or tote bags, et cetera, like just dummy mockups. We did an animation for a couple of the concepts to actually sort of bring them to lifes and scored them. We did that in-person in one of the sponsors, quite extraordinary conference rooms in a downtown Houston highrise <laugh>. So yeah, it was quite something for a setting for that. So as expansive, we brought a ton of stuff and the three ideas were radically different. And

the thing that I think that I'm the most delighted by is that my junior most designer on the project, and I took the time to actually animate those concepts and score them. Which was just like a dream come true to come back and go here's seven seconds, or 10 seconds, of music paired with animation of a logo to sort of pitch the ideas. That was a great, great joy. We had a lot of fun at the first presentation. Speaking for myself, I assume Gwen did <laugh>, but...

GWEN I did! Back to my battle metaphors and you know, anticipating the worst <laugh>, although by this point of course I knew Jett and the team at FÖDA and had a lot of faith in them. But, I still remember the day walking in, I was very nervous about what we were gonna see and they did a little sneak peek for me, but it was literally like 30 minutes before everyone arrived. So I didn't get a lot of a sneak peek. And I do remember Jett, you guys showed me all three and every single one I was like, Ooh, <laugh>, I really love this!

JETT <laugh>

GWEN There was one that was pretty out there.

JETT Mm-hmm.

GWEN I know you know the one I'm talking about Jett.

JETT Yeah. Yeah. It was concept three. <laugh>.

GWEN Yeah, concept three is maybe the best euphemism, but every single one—

JETT It was bananas <laugh>.

GWEN Yeah, every single one I was like, I get it. I get how we got here, I get how it connects to the symphony. And even the bananas crazy concept three one, I don't think we would've worked with it long term, but it still made sense. And I appreciated that they spent time fully developing three things. It was clear that there wasn't one that was like, oh, I'm gonna just throw in a toss one because I know they're

gonna toss it and it makes it easier to steer them to this one. None of that came through. It was all very super interesting ideas.

And as we talked through them all, Jett and the team were talking about how they got there. And so it was really a fun presentation. There were the posters on the easels and so we were all physically, like we sat at a conference table and they went through the three with animations and everything, and then we physically walked around and we're kind of breaking into these smaller groups discussing and you could just hear people reacting. So you have musicians, you have board members, you have different types of people in the room talking through it. But we all, I would say for the most part, really gravitated towards the ultimate one that was selected. The first iteration of it. Yeah. Everybody left the room just feeling very energized and very excited about it. I didn't, I personally and didn't hear from anyone any single moment of concern of "oh gosh, we need to have a fourth option". There was no question that the design was in the room that day.

BRYONY You know, you fairly quickly decided on the direction. So let's talk about the monogram and the logo itself a little bit more deeply, in your process of selecting Veronesi as a primary typeface and the rather unique and heavily debated on Brand New inspiration references for the logo.

JETT <laugh>. I love that, that became so contentious. That's kind of hilarious to me. I think as designers you see whatever you see as you're drawing things. It's just an offhand sort of comment like, we see this, or we see that, while you're making something. There's no need or desire for us to sort of post rationalize how we got there. And I'm always willing to be candid about the things that we see when we're delineating an idea of where it's coming from. I think it's good to be as open and vulnerable with a client as possible in those spaces, and to talk about: this is what was motivating us, this is what we were excited about. And let the enthusiasm just roll even if that means you say some things

that go, okay, wouldn't have seen that but cool <laugh>, you know? So I think that's fun. Personally.

The three concepts that we brought to the table, the first one was devotedly modernist and it's the one that is the bones of the final concept. We had one that I would call more directly sort of contemporary music and a very clean, and full of flourish and ornament, in a beautiful way, employing all its lines from musical staves and notation and other things. And it was gorgeous. And by the way, that concept is where Veronesi, I think originally lived. And then in the third one, the one that Gwen and I have referenced as bananas, we had taken the approach of like, we think we have something very clean and modest. We have something very decorative and contemporary. We need something that is completely out of the box and outrageous to see how far does the symphony want to push reaching a new audience. And so in that one we'd sort of leaned into this world of three dimensional form based on calligraphy, pushed into these volumes and voids overlaid with the names of composers. And a really intense color. It was awesome. We knew it was too far, but we wanted to bring it into the room anyways, <laugh>. So...

GWEN For what it's worth Jett, not to derail you, but I have it framed in my office as a decorative.

JETT Oh that's great!

GWEN Because I love it so much, <laugh>. I mean I just adore it and everyone who walks in is like, oh my gosh, that's the coolest poster I've ever seen. So it lives on.

JETT That's lovely. That makes me so happy. We brought three things and I, I should mention Bryony, I think something important, the studio years ago, probably 10, maybe 12 years ago... I was reading some Paul Rand interviews and got kind of caught up with the mythology of Paul and in particular the tale of he and Steve Jobs and apocryphal or not,

I'm not sure, but just the notion that he, you know, he supposedly presented Jobs with one idea for NEXT computers and that Jobs purportedly asked him for options. And Rand who I had to believe said it in a wonderfully curmudgeonly sort of way, supposed to have said, "if you want options, hire other designers. You have brought me a problem, I have brought you a solution". And I have always thought that that was really incredible from a certain perspective, and that the idea of a quota in a design process is a very bad idea.

And so, you know, we don't obligate ourselves even contractually to how many concepts we're gonna bring. We actually have in our contract what we call the Rand Clause that says, "you have brought us a problem, we'll bring you a solution, there may be more than one solution to the problem, there may be only one". And that language is in our boiler plate legal. So we don't always bring more than one idea, and we don't always bring a fully developed set of ideas. But for the symphony we were so inspired, it's just like where would you stop the faucet? Where would you turn the faucet off on the inspiration of classical music, you know, number one and number two, which classical music are we talking about? Pick a composer, pick an era, pick a part of the world and you're talking about a different art form each time you swap that out. And so we had a hard time stopping at three <laugh>, this is the honest truth.

BRYONY I can imagine.

JETT Too many. The one that stuck, the first versions of it didn't have any articulation yet. It was devotedly a modernist, it was of the building, of the architecture. We wanted to do one that just really said, we're gonna take Jones Hall and that's what we're gonna pull through. And so it was just straight up sixties modernism owing all of its structure to Jones Hall itself. The black and gold already emerged in that concept. And the icon emerged in that concept though in a much more Swiss-German tutonic sort of fashion. That was the one that everyone loved

in the room. It was powerful, it was iconic. A, everyone knew it needed to move forward and Gwen and the team deserve credit for being the rare, rare, very rare client that could say, is it possible to bring some parts of concept two over to concept one and make that work?

And normally that's a designer's nightmare, but they loved Veronesi, which lived in concept two. We took a really hard look at it and my feeling was, you know what? Yeah actually I think these can be merged and I don't think this needs to stay devotedly modernist. And I think we can hold onto the modernist structure of this idea, and our grid layouts, and our organizational structures, and the severity of the form to a degree. But I think we can actually pull this towards Veronesi and bring Veronesi into the structured layouts of that concept to make them work together. And they do, they do so fabulously, like tremendously.

I wanna digress a moment to say, I think it's really important to note like, you know, there's a lot of us, you know, walking around feeling pretty good about ourselves as designers that have been practicing for a long time or just got started and we think we're full of all these brilliant ideas. And I will be the first one to tell you that there is a beautiful 20-year portfolio behind our studio, and it looks that way because of client comments. It's not because we walked into the room with every idea and every answer solved. It's not because we had all the answers and all the things thought out. It's because someone said no to something, or someone suggested to figuring out a way to mash two things up that we thought was kind of crazy. But we'll try. These things are so much richer for their input.

You know, we brought the parts into the room, sure. But we even, we hadn't figured out that they could be married that way and it was Gwen and the symphony that said, oh well maybe these two things could be married up. And that's incredible. I think it's important to

underscore that really great design does not happen in a vacuum and it is a wholly contingent upon thoughtful input from the client. They're driving the process too. I don't know that we would've ever heard to us to marry those two concepts had it not come up organically in the room.

BRYONY And how did that come about on your end Gwen? How did that conversation happen?

GWEN I would love to say it was a genius moment, but <laugh>, it was more like the posters were literally next to each other. We loved this "H" mark, it was the first animation we saw. It made complete sense in every way to me, the second I saw it, like I loved it. And it was beautiful with the poster they mocked up the sample, but the second this Veronesi font that we saw in the second concept, I felt like I couldn't live without it 'cuz it was so beautiful too. So, it was really just the two of them side-by-side and thinking, I like this thing and I like this thing, can they live together? And that was the question. And luckily it sounds like Jett agrees that it was a helpful comment. I mean I have all this collateral here on my desk, I'm just sitting here staring at it as we talk and I'm thinking I can't imagine them not being together anymore.

JETT Bryony, I wanna circle back to one part of your question. I wandered off as I'm prone to do and it may seem like I evaded part of that and I don't want to, so I'm wanna circle back.

BRYONY No problem.

JETT One of the things for me in terms of what we saw in the process and how these things come together, as we started to add articulation to the mark, it was originally inspired by the upright sort of neck of a cello and the way that the headstock rolls over. And we thought that was really beautiful. And then we're looking at all these things that are about Houston. The symphony has to, and this came from interview with John, the CEO, the symphony has to compete for butts and seats and eyes on programs with everything else you might do in a city as big and diverse as Houston. Right?

So they're not competing necessarily with every other performing arts group in the city. They're competing with the Astros, or the Rockets, or what's happening at the MFA, or all the different things an enormous city can offer. We wanted to arrive at something that was really, really, really powerfully iconic almost to the notion of this should be something that can live on a baseball cap that I could wear to an Astros game, and someone would go, oh that's cool that you know, that's the symphony. But it would feel right at home and even at a sporting event. It's sort of a weird bar to set for ourselves, but we felt they needed to have that sort of parody.

BRYONY Mm-hmm.

JETT If you will.

BRYONY That's a really interesting observation.

JETT Yeah. We wanted them to be like on that level of a singular, sort of iconic form number one. And number two, once we started articulating the form, you can't do anything in Houston without getting in a car. Let's just make sure that's very clear <laughter> to anyone that's never been to Houston. Okay? It is a sprawling, immense city. I read once, it's the inverse of Paris, like the number of humans per square foot in Paris, Houston is the exact opposite. It's the number of people per square mile <laugh>. It flips the other way and it's how spread out humans are here. It is a city commanded by, linked by, determined by freeways. There is nothing you are doing that's not gonna require to get on a freeway at some point during the day in Houston, Texas. The car, and the car culture, and the freeway system is the arterial blood of the city.

It is not something that can be ignored. And I know that it ground on some people for us to suggest that that's something that was, that occurred to us. But when you think about a bow moving across a cello, across the strings of a violin, these two vertical planes and

the movement that goes with it, it's like, I'm sorry... I mean I see the movement of cars going over a freeway overpass. I can't separate them in my mind, and dear God I can't think of any better way to manage Houston freeways than to listen to classical music in the car because they will make you go crazy <laugh>. The freeway systems are so challenging, you need to put on something that you can kind of take the edge off in the car.

BRYONY And you know, sometimes you go fast and sometimes you go slow.

JETT <laugh>. Yeah, exactly. We saw a lot of things but I think along with the cello forms, and the bows moving and so on, in the end, one of the board members cited at the first board presentation that what they loved about the icon was that it felt like we had created a new form of musical notation just for them. We hadn't used something derivative from any other form of musical notation. It was a new symbol in the catalog of musical symbols, which we were never trying to make a musical symbol, in fact we were really trying to avoid it. So I don't think we could have created that had we been aiming for it, I think we would've missed. And I thought that was just wonderful praise. When we did one of our slides, once we had that comment from the board, we started incorporating it into the slides. So we show all the musical notation forms and the Houston Symphony icon is tucked in amongst them. I think we gave you that slide.

BRYONY Yeah, we do have it in the case study.

JETT It's kind of amazing, you know, it's doing that job. It does feel like it's a new piece of vocabulary. The joy of that, for me, is that you can see whatever you wanna see in these things. I see one thing, someone else in my design team might see something else, Gwen might see something different, the readers at Brand New might see something else, and that's all fine. It's sort of like lyrics of a song. It's okay to have your own interpretation. Sometimes you don't get the lyrics right.

BRYONY I think it's not so much that they don't see the freeway or they see the freeway.

JETT Yeah.

BRYONY I think for many it was jarring to use a freeway as inspiration 'cuz really...

JETT Yeah. <laugh>

BRYONY When we think of inspiration, it's beautiful things, right? It's all the nice—

JETT Mm-hmm.

BRYONY —of the world.

JETT Sure.

BRYONY Not necessarily a freeway, but the inspiration doesn't need to be beautiful.

JETT Yeah, no it does not.

BRYONY I think that's where the nuance exists in that conversation, in that inspiration does not need to be beautiful. It is a reference of the city.

GWEN And if I can defend it a little bit too, and as a lifelong Houstonian, it's true like this is the city, right? And every city has its flaws, but somehow the flaws become the character as well. And I think that FÖDA did a really good job. One of the things we asked them, I think from the beginning, is we need a mark or we need a logo that represents symphony but it also needs to represent Houston.

JETT Mm-hmm.

GWEN Going back to the sports team conversation this does stand on its own as a representation of Houston, AND the symphony. So you can go either direction or both directions with it. And just because the freeway thing was in Jett's mind, or the designer's mind, doesn't mean that it's a negative. I don't think it's negative at all. I think it implies every positive thing that we wanted it to imply.

BRYONY As the materials evolve, I mean you start to see applications and develop the system, how much of it is taken on internally, if at all? Or is it all FÖDA? How is this evolving so that it's applicable in the long term?

JETT We developed an enormous sort of breadth of ideas about the system, assets laid out, posters, catalogs, event programs, you name it. We got way down in there with a million things, <laugh> it was a joy, every one of them was so much fun to design. And then of course we did the thing that we always do, which is a fairly thoughtful and elaborate graphic standard as well to help guide the next designer in that sort of the baton pass that is a rebrand. We got to meet the incoming new Art Director for the symphony and be able to have a really robust baton pass. I went to the symphony Saturday night, to see Holst's The Planets, which was incredible and Camille Thomas, which was breathtaking. It was a real joy, a real delight to see all of the signs about, you know, there'll be no late seating, turn off your ringers, and all the little kind of—

BRYONY The mundane stuff.

JETT Yeah, the mundane stuff that people usually don't wanna think about, talk about, and were rarely asked to design 'cuz it's just not cost effective, usually. It was lovely to see the symphony had taken the baton pass and all these things were beautiful. It was a step and repeat setup for your photos, there was extended posters, screen-mesh-style banners if you will for upcoming events, the marquee outside and lights... Oh my goodness. It was a real joy to see the system spread out, the next program developed, and all of it working, and all of it beautiful. Just really wonderful to see that transitional process work and to see the symphony, from my seat, looking like they're loving it—best I can tell.

GWEN Yes, we are loving it. We have a new Creative Director that started, she had an interesting start 'cuz she started three months before it got rolled out publicly, but it was already decided.

JETT Mm-hmm.

GWEN It's been really fun for her to take on the branding standards and apply them everywhere. And we continue to work with FÖDA on some things. They designed our season brochure for the 22 – 23 season, which was announced right around when the rebrand came out. And then they also... one kind of sub-project that's been really impactful for us is our printed programs in the Hall. We've gone through some pains with it over Covid, you know, kind of lost the programs 'cuz we weren't in the Hall and then we brought them back but they were very low quality and kind of just utilitarian. They're monthly magazines basically that double duty as a program booklet and they were in such need of a refresh.

And I think the new application that we work with FÖDA on, getting these brought up to our new brand standard has been so rewarding because I constantly now in the Hall just hear people saying, how beautiful are these programs? Like people literally just walk by me and say these things. Of course also board members and people that know me tell me that. But it makes me smile every time I get a new, crisp, fresh program booklet every month and it has the beautiful branding. It's incredible. That's another really exciting little piece that came out of this.

BRYONY So that was actually gonna be my next question. What kind of feedback are you receiving from board members, from musicians, from the music director, everybody. And so you spoke a little bit about that particular application, but it'd be great to hear about that feedback on the broader sense of the entire rebrand.

GWEN Our music director, thankfully <laugh> loves it. I was kind of like, I don't know what we do if he doesn't like it, but <laugh> didn't have to deal with that. He just adores it and it's so sweet because he and his agent, you know they're European and they come in town and they are like, can I get another T-shirt? Oh I need a hat for this person. And the other funny thing that was totally unexpected for me, it was like from the first time we presented it to the full board, people have been

wanting to wear this thing. Everybody wants something to wear. I just didn't think about that. I was thinking about the posters, and the magazine, and the website, and all of that. So suddenly it was like we were scrambling to make enough hats and t-shirts and tote bags to satisfy everybody. And now they wanna bring back retail just because everybody's so excited to wear it. So I think the idea that people are wearing this on baseball caps is definitely coming to fruition.

But more generally, I don't know. It sounds like sugarcoating maybe. But the truth is I haven't gotten negative feedback. I just haven't. After all the forewarning I was receiving going into this project, I had kind of girded myself against, okay, you're gonna hear negative criticism, you're gonna get some comments, not everyone's gonna like it, I had prepared for that and it just has not happened.

BRYONY Cherish that.

GWEN Yeah, I know.

JETT <laugh>. That's amazing.

GWEN Like I said, it's a miracle. I don't know...

JETT It's a miracle.

BRYONY I don't think it's a miracle in the sense, I think there is a lot of hard work that was put in, into making it happen the way you did. It speaks to the partnership, it speaks to the research, to the open conversations. It speaks to the whole process that everybody feels so invested in the outcome and enjoys the outcome. When there's trouble, there's usually a glitch in the process that makes it so. And it sounds like that was not the case at all.

Jett, obviously there's a personal connection to this whole project based on your background and you approached the RFQ, and everything somewhere between traditionally and unexpectedly, so

that it would come to fruition. And I wanna know in all of that, what was the most satisfying aspect of working in this project?

JETT Ooh, the single most satisfying aspect. Oh that is a tough one. We live on rare air in our studio and that a lot of our projects are really pleasing and we get to work with some really amazing folks. And this project was sort of like an embarrassment of riches and that every part of it was compelling, and interesting, and exciting. And again, to steal from Gwen, like sugarcoating. There was no negative experience to doing this. And you know, in some projects like this, especially at this scale can get pretty challenging and contentious, and there can be emotions to manage, and egos to persuade, and so on. But this wasn't that. Maybe that's a function of the time, in the moment of the time that we were doing it, that there was a sense of pulling together, I think may perhaps brought on by the pandemic that might be unique to that moment.

So it's tough to point to any one thing of it and say that like there's the most satisfying, but if I had to strain for it, I think what I would actually say the most satisfying part of it, selfishly for me, was the project represents a really even exchange and a back and forth dialogue. Even within our studio. Yes, it was a big idea moving a certain direction that may have started at that first creative presentation, but the articulation of the icon itself. I had drawn the first pass of that, but the final shape of it, and the received more of its tuning to start to look like Veronesi, it came from Ryan, a designer in the studio. The animation of the mark for the initial pitch and the presentation of it came from, sorry, I'm having a hard time—allergies are getting me there. I'm not being emotional. I promise. <laugh>

One of the youngest designers in our studio, A, her animation of the work was really beautiful. The way these things mesh together, the notion of the structure and the feel of Veronesi came from Sruthi. You

know, and on and on. And it's like the project really does represent this very beautiful mashing together of wildly different perspectives from people with different ages, different backgrounds, different ethnicities, different gender identities, you know, on and on and on. And yet remarkably all of that is present in the work. And it also is responsive to that same level of expansive sort of human diversity and opinion and thought and feeling living with the symphony. And so having those two things converge in work in this sort of frankly somewhat utopian kind of way, it's a rarity and an absolute pleasure, and a real delight. I'm very proud of that sort of no ego sharing of ideas and thoughts that move back and forth, in and amongst my own team. It makes me really happy. It's always the goal and I'm very proud of them.

BRYONY Sounds like you had your own creative symphony.

JETT <laugh> Well played. Yeah. I gotta tell you how many bad music puns underscored <laugh> this process. I mean, <laugh>, I saved that one. I tried to do this whole interview without using any, but I can't tell you how many profoundly bad dad jokes and music puns every step of the way. Groaners in every Slack huddle, Zoom call, in-house sketch session. I mean, I laid it on thick <laugh>.

BRYONY I have a young saxophone player at home. We are in year two, and judging by the amount of jokes in almost two years, I can only imagine a whole group of people deeply invested in the topic. Must be insane.

JETT You lose track of how much language is actually, like how often we use musical metaphors in common language, just a common parlance, right? Well I really don't want to hear a flat note with this and blah blah blah. It does live in our language. And so it got to a point where it was embarrassing. It's like, I'm actually really not trying to use a musical metaphor right now. Let me grasp for another one. Because it would just happen every call. There was so many groans. I don't know how the crew made it through it. I mean I dad joked them hard. It was ruthless <laugh>.

BRYONY All right, final question. Instead of looking back, what of what lies ahead is the most exciting for each of you on a personal level?

GWEN Look, we're still coming out of Covid recovery, all of the performing arts are, you know? The lifestyles changed, things changed, and we're all getting back to the halls and supporting the arts. And so for us, we have this beautiful aesthetic, we have this beautiful visual brand that I'm so proud of, and I'm very excited to have that asset as we go forward with rebuilding our old audience, and also reaching the new audience, and attracting new lovers of music. And so for me that's exciting. I also, this is less profound I guess, but you know, back to the kind of wearable and visual tactical part, we really wanna make a giant "H" mark. Like it's our dream. We're trying to figure out functionally how to do it, that we can take around and people can take photos with because people just love this image. Finding more ways to apply it in the world since there seems to be a demand for that, we're eager to continue to explore those things.

JETT Well I certainly hope that we will have more opportunities to serve the symphony because we love it. And it's been such a successful process thus far. That's a no-brainer. I think if we expand it out further, I don't know... I suffer, the role for our studio of being like, you know, fearless leader and FÖDA's, exaggerated sense of ambition. That's supposed to live with me. And so there is a piece of me that would really like to see where a exercise, and an outcome like this leads us in the future in terms of being able to serve larger, more community oriented entities like a performing arts group, like a museum, maybe perhaps even a city itself. We've got a pretty good bucket list running of things that we've gotten to do and this makes me go, okay, well maybe now like a small town or a village <laugh>? Maybe a full-blown city identity?

There's no check on the ambition for me and the scale of the studio. And so I think for us, we feel like the outcome of the Houston Symphony is really wonderful evidence that you can move through a process with an enormous amount of emotion attached to it, and a

lot of different players, and actually have really great outcomes. That would be very exciting to me to see where that leads next. Anywhere in the world that might take us as well. We've been very lucky to play outside of our little sandbox in Austin, a lot. And so it would be fun to discover such an opportunity somewhere in the world.

BRYONY Well, I wanna thank you for sharing this particular chapter that in a way is setting you both up or a next step, for what is to come. And while it was a deeply invested project, both on a personal level and a professional level for both of you, you can definitely see the benefits of that investment, of that immersion, of being knee-deep into every bit of the project from beginning to end and the lessons that you're taking, and the ambitions that you're taking from it of, well, if we could do this, then what can we do next? Right?

JETT Indeed.

BRYONY Thank you so much for sharing this with us and with our audience. It Was a pleasure having you on The Follow-Up.

GWEN Wonderful. Thanks for having me.

JETT Bryony, what a pleasure. Thank you. It's been an honor to sit with you this morning.

ARMIN There were so many great insights in this episode thanks to Jett's considerate and thoughtful responses that are a great reflection of FÖDA's process and approach and that were clearly very much appreciated by Gwen and her team. You know you've done something right as a designer when the client frames a mock-up from the, quote, bananas, end quote, concept as a keepsake, which is a good moral of the story to end on: The bananas version can often be seen as the indulgent or almost selfish option or the one that makes the other options look sane but it is most definitely always worth having one option like this to test the comfort zone of the client and you never know what will come out of it, even if it's just a keepsake. Also, when in doubt and you are in the position of having to design an identity for a

symphony maybe avoid solving the logo by choosing a sans serif and adding a swoosh thing to the left.

Today, thanks for listening. Until next time, we'll be here, we hope you'll be there.