



THE INDEPENDENT

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Why 'own label' releases are a vital tool for classical musicians

By Robert Maycock

Michael Nyman does it. Philip Glass has done it twice. The London Symphony Orchestra do it so often that they can't stop. Bringing out their own recordings is classical music's robust reply to the decreasing enthusiasm of international companies for full-length works rather than snippets, seasoned and respected artists rather than aspiring superstars, and an audience it knows like the back of its hand.

The big-name "own labels" are the most visible signs of a practice that has been widespread at grassroots level for years. For musicians or ensembles that spend much of their life playing and touring to audiences that range from under a hundred to a few thousand, the economic facts are subtly different.

There is, of course, a classical independent sector in the traditional sense, and it's a thriving one: companies such as Naxos, Chandos, Hyperion and BIS are, in terms of repertoire and releases, a dominant force. However, at grassroots level, particularly for smaller groups or individual musicians, the key factor is that the investment has two purposes: sales and promotion.

Anybody can hire a room or a producer. After some post-production in a professional studio, the CDs are run off. Then they go into the touring kit. One batch becomes part of the marketing pack, others are sold in the concert foyer. The rest are sold through the musicians' website. At this grassroots level they really can't lose; and the public gets to have recordings that otherwise wouldn't be available.

However, for the more ambitious, there is a role model in the cunningly titled ArtistLed label. This creation of the US cello-piano duo David Finckel and Wu Han started in 1997 and has released eight CDs. Because of the name it's guaranteed to come up in internet searches. Styling itself "classical music's first musician-directed, internet-based recording company", the founders say ArtistLed is "a means for musicians to record what they want the

way they want, and to offer their records directly to the public".

Philip Glass ran Point Music in collaboration with Polygram for a decade. The deal was that half the releases were expected to be commercially effective while the others could be less so, and since the composer's own music was a mainstay of the Nonesuch catalogue at the time, Point Music concentrated mainly on other composers: "Music that I liked that might not sell very well, and I would balance that with records that I also liked that would sell very well. We ended up making about 60 records - about half of them are good in the sense that they are music that would not have been recorded had we not done it."

Other composers on the label included Gavin Bryars and Jon Gibson, and Glass's own Low Symphony (based on themes from Bowie's *Low*) was one of the releases intended to boost sales. Eventually, Polygram bought out the company. Glass was philosophical: "I would take a 10-year contract with anyone - you can achieve a lot in 10 years." But when he formed another label, Orange Mountain Music, the model was significantly different.

Founded to release some of his own archive recordings, Orange Mountain runs from his New York studio. The label is distributed internationally and sold through Amazon. The idea was to extend into other composers' music, but in the last couple of years it has become the label of choice for Glass's new concert works. In the UK, Gavin Bryars has GB Records, which has reached half a dozen releases now sold through the trade, though "autographed copies" are available on his website. Michael Nyman launched MN Records last year with rather more fanfare and grumbles about the rigid schedules and unsatisfactory marketing of his works on major labels.

Star tabla player Zakir Hussain set up Moment Records in 1991, preserving performances by himself and colleagues plus a compilation by Shakti, the group he formed

with John McLaughlin. Sir John Eliot Gardiner founded his label Soli Deo Gloria specifically for a 51-CD project to record all Bach's cantatas which his then company Deutsche Grammophon had unceremoniously dumped.

This year the label has extended to "SDG On The Night", a venture which involves recording the first half of a concert, burning CDs during the interval, and selling them to the audience as they leave. The Bach project has own-label competition from another cantata cycle conducted by Ton Koopman: the recordings appear on his Antoine Marchand label, a "sub-label" of the Dutch company Challenge. Both cycles sell directly online.

London orchestras, joined by regional ones and most recently by the Wigmore Hall as a chamber-music promoter, have rushed down the same path. The pioneer was the Royal Philharmonic, which started releasing its own recordings back in the vinyl days, but it's the LSO Live label that has inspired the current rush.

The breakthrough was that the players agreed to make recordings at their concerts and to work for royalties on sales instead of up-front fees. The CDs could then be sold direct to audiences for less than half the price of traditional releases. What has resulted is a catalogue of around 80 CDs, including works by Brahms, Elgar, Beethoven and Berlioz, with conductors Sir Colin Davis and Bernard Haitink prominent. Treated with initial suspicion by the media, the releases now regularly show up as top recommendations.

The London Philharmonic, the Hallé and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic now have their own labels. Not yet the Philharmonia, which instead became the first orchestra to provide a live concert webcast, giving itself a head start in a field that the classical world has been slow to exploit - a different form of independent distribution that in the long run has even more potential than home-grown CDs.