

The King of classics

Budget label Naxos is taking on big-budget competition, and it's winning over both fans and critics, ROBERT EVERETT-GREEN writes

BY ROBERT EVERETT-GREEN

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2005 PAGE R11

We think of pop recording as a kingdom of stars, but the classical-music industry has been star-struck ever since Enrico Caruso became the first smash-hit singer on disc a century ago. So when a German businessman based in Hong Kong decided to launch a new classical label in 1987 with no star performers at all, the major labels thought they had good reason to sneer, assuming they even noticed.

Eighteen years later, Klaus Heymann runs a lean global empire that in some countries has gobbled up half the retail market for classical CDs in numbers of discs sold. The catalogue for his Naxos label now lists about 3,000 recordings, many of unusual repertoire, all still available at prices well below those charged by classical labels at EMI, Sony/BMG and Universal.

Naxos also seems to have outrun its rivals on the Internet. Last month, Naxos's entire recorded output of 75,000 tracks went on sale on eMusic, a U.S. subscription service that claims to shift 2.4 million downloads per month. Naxos's own on-line music library gives streamed access to 130,000 tracks from its own catalogue or those of affiliated labels for \$15 (U.S.) a month or less (naxos.com runs a similar streaming service, for a puzzlingly higher monthly rate, along with a free podcast schedule of music from recent releases).

Most surprisingly, perhaps, Naxos in the past year or so has overcome the bargain-basement stigma of its early days. Its recording of American composer William Bolcom's massive song-cycle *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* made many critics' lists of the best recordings of 2004, and a few months ago Gramophone magazine named Naxos its label of the year. A recent Boston Globe feature by veteran critic Richard Dyer about EMI's \$1-million studio recording of *Tristan und Isolde* with star tenor Placido Domingo gave almost equal space to a Naxos recording from the Royal Swedish Opera, and Naxos didn't suffer much from the comparison, least of all from the news that its *Tristan* cost about half as much as EMI's.

"We now routinely announce ourselves to be the world's leading classical label and nobody has complained so far," says Heymann on his website. A look through his catalogue and at where the records are coming from makes his claim even more extensive than it appears. While the majors have concentrated on international stars doing mostly standard repertoire (or crossover projects), Naxos has insinuated itself into the classical scene in many of the countries where its discs are sold. Orchestras and opera houses that have something to offer but that were ignored by the big multinationals have found that they can have a recording career, often while playing music written by their compatriots.

Naxos's American Classics line, for instance, has produced dozens of albums devoted to music by the likes of Samuel Barber, Edward McDowell and Ned Rorem, many of them recorded by solid mid-level orchestras such as the Buffalo Philharmonic and the Seattle Symphony Orchestra. U.S. critics have been lavish in their praise, in part because Naxos is perceived to have stepped into the gap left when Warner's Nonesuch label shifted its focus away from American composition and toward world music and alt-pop figures such as David Byrne, Youssou N'Dour and Wilco.

One of every four classical discs sold in Canada is a Naxos CD, and the company has recorded more Canadian musicians than any other international label. Guitarist Norbert Kraft and harpsichordist Bonnie Silver, Naxos's A&R team in Canada, have produced over 200 albums during the past dozen years. That includes 30 discs made by conductor Kevin Mallon with Toronto Camerata and the Aradia Ensemble, one of which (an album of Lully ballet music) has sold nearly 40,000 copies. The late Georg Tintner, who spent the last years of his career conducting Symphony Nova Scotia, recorded an entire Bruckner symphony cycle for Naxos that has sold over 490,000 copies worldwide.

Canadian repertoire is still scarce on Naxos discs, but in 1997 the company produced a double-disc *Introduction to Canadian Music* that includes works by 33 Canadians -- something you won't find on Deutsche Grammophon. The set, and 274 titles from CBC Records, are also available on Naxos's on-line music library.

Naxos sells none of its albums from its website, for fear of alienating retailers, some of whom have set up Naxos-only boutiques in their gift shops and used-book stores. But the company's policy of never deleting any title from its catalogue seems in tune with the on-demand delivery model coming into view for Internet music sales.

"About 10 per cent of our business currently comes from downloads and digital streaming," says Raymond Bisha, promotions manager for Naxos Canada. "We expect this percentage will almost double by next year."

Part of that income comes from institutional subscriptions to the on-line library, which universities and some public libraries see as a relatively cheap way (at \$3,750 for a year's unlimited use) to gain access to a large music archive without the bother of buying and maintaining the physical discs. Some, such as the University of Toronto and the Calgary Public Library, are running the service through their own websites, so cardholders can hear the music at home.

None of these changes have affected Naxos's stripped-down business model, which relies on modest creative expenses, low production costs, minimal promotion and global distribution. The label flaunts its no-frills philosophy with each disc, sticking to a cover-design template that is unvaryingly dowdy but also instantly recognizable. A custom paper over-sleeve for a Brahms symphony cycle with Marin Alsop and the London Philharmonic Orchestra was a rare departure from the norm. But with Alsop, Naxos has happened on a star in the making, as well as a figure of controversy, following her contentious appointment as music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra last summer.

Stars, however, will neither make nor break Naxos, which began as an attempt to exploit a vacant price niche but which has evolved into much more. When other, larger companies have done budget classical discs, they've tended to stick to the tried and true: Mozart, Beethoven and more Mozart, often in recordings that have been released many times before. Naxos, by contrast, has put out hundreds of recordings of music by lesser-known composers, and has even prompted new repertoire to be written. In Britain, Naxos commissioned Sir Peter Maxwell Davies to write the Naxos Quartets, a cycle of 10 string quartets, six of which have already been recorded by the Maggini Quartet.

In that context, the most intriguing thing about the Naxos story is the way it has plucked the feathers of the toughest canard in the classical trade: That only the so-called core classics can withstand the ups and downs of the business. At a time when many symphony orchestras are retreating from new and unfamiliar

repertoire, Naxos is taking chances, and thriving.

© Copyright 2005 Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.

