

Articles | Considering Classical

By Sandy Marshall

Reprinted from the September/October 2000 issue of NAPRA Review. For more information, call 800-367-1907 or visit their website at www.napra.com.

When I asked retailers around the country about their experience with classical music, I met most frequently with strained silences, then stuttered demurring. It's obvious that within our niche many people are uncomfortable with this category.

It is difficult even to define Classical- especially in today's marketplace, where categories morph into hybrids and many ideal broaden beyond traditional scope. Certainly the music must relate to a tradition that developed over centuries and received, as Bill Horwedel of Spring Hill Music phrased it, a "cultural seal of approval." And yes, we are speaking mostly of "European musical tradition," as Lee Starkey of East West Bookshop (Mountain View, California) stated. But what are our parameters? Chant and Early Music (Medieval/Renaissance) are considered pre-Classical, for example; yet many stores find it effective to group them together.

Without exception, every store I spoke with has had success with classical healing/learning products. Yet many think of these CDs as Healing/Learning music rather than Classical. According to Ted Cox of Tower Records in Vienna, Virginia, the New Age market prefers "Classical Crossover," a growing genre encompassing classical melodies with contemporary presentations, those that incorporate nature sounds, and all that are arranged and/or packaged to appeal to a modern audience.



Who is Buying It?

Mothers, for one, according to Linda Caldean of Janesville, Wisconsin's Earthsong Bookstore, whose store sells a lot of The Mozart Effect: Music for Babies; Spring Hill Music's The Mozart Effect series sells well for many retailers. And Lee Starkey notes particular success with Naxos' Listen Learn and Grow For Newborns. Another big group is teachers, who use CDs from Sound Health by The Arcangelos Chamber Ensemble from Advanced Brain Technologies. Music for Concentration, Music for Learning, and Music for Thinking, in particular, are popular for classroom use. A related group is adults 40+ (others said 35+ or even 30+) who also use Sound Health, but prefer Music to De-Stress and Music to Relax. Caldean used to carry more classical, but demand was not great.

Therapists (psychologists, Reiki practitioners, massage therapists, aromatherapists, etc) comprise about 30 percent of Tony DuPuis' music business at Enchanted Forest in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Therapists use music during treatment; patients then come to the store for the same CD. He believes "people are becoming more aware of the value that music has to offer the soul... that it does change your perspective." He puts therapeutic classical CDs in his Classical section and in his New Age and Healing sections.

As the Cultural Creative market matures, Bill Horwedel believes customers may be just as interested in classical tradition as in Eastern cultures. Ted Cox has seen extraordinary interest in Hildegard von Bingen's music, as well as certain Early Music groups like Anonymous 4. He noted Philips' Set Your Life to Music series as a great seller, packaged to be attractive and useful to today's women. Calming music, chant, and learning titles for children draw women, while his male customers like electronic, flamenco, or jazz crossovers.

Classical healing/learning tools began reaching consumers three or four years ago, following a "slow sales incline," according to Liz Atwell of Nature's Gifts in Modesto, California. She thinks people are still exploring this music, and that as they "move further into body/mind/spirit, [awareness of] music's healing... effects will get stronger and stronger." Kathleen McIntyre of Denver's The Open Door Bookstore comments that her chant sales (except Anonymous 4) fell off some years ago and that The Mozart Effect is starting to fall off as well, but Sound Health is still doing well. Lee Starkey agrees that the Gregorian chant "fad" has passed its height, noting more Hildegard mania recently.

Generally, holiday seasons bring increases, especially for choral and sacred music, and certain stars can bring people to Classical. At Lee's location, Sarah Brightman and Andrea Bocelli sell well.



What Makes Today's Classical New?

Lloyd Barde of Backroads Music out of Corte Madera, California, has this simple view: "If today's music is still viable in 100-plus years, it may be viewed as Classical. If this is true, then our understanding of Classical is a fluid field, incorporating new perspectives and aesthetics.

The field of psychoacoustics (studying the effect of sound on the human nervous system) is growing in knowledge, research, and data networking, according to Joshua Leeds, composer/author/sound researcher and co-producer of Advanced Brain Technologies' popular Sound Health series. Certain studies that linked mental skill increases with Mozart's music were imprecisely publicized, engendering a somewhat reckless wave that has met with healthy skepticism. But certain products are scientifically provable. He explains that "the extraordinary universal principle of entrainment [natural synchronization of heart rate, brain waves, and breath to external periodic rhythms] is fully grounded in medicine, biology, and physics. Rhythm can change brain waves. Sound is the sacred, powerful tool that it has been used as for thousands of years."

Although classical music is conducive to learning and relaxation, both Leeds and Horwedel assert that for specific effects, entire pieces and faithful performances are not the ideal. Some respectful rearrangement (altering or removing highly dissonant sections, re-contouring rhythms or dynamics, and/or creating "random sonic events" to stimulate active listening) is typically needed for optimal psychoacoustic effect. Dawn Atkinson, producer of albums selling over five million copies, had a difficult time selling the "classical crossover" concept to labels about eight years ago. Now that these CDs have sold well, more labels are supporting this market. She just produced A Different Prelude (due from Decca in August), whose modern renderings of classical works may be some of the most appealing crossovers yet. Ted Cox has an advance copy in his store, and states that when he plays this CD people actually stop what they're doing to listen.



What's the Draw?

Calm and class are what attract listeners, according to Atwell. "People carry themselves just a little bit differently when they walk into an establishment playing classical music." Her older clientele shop longer when Classical is playing. (She finds Worldbeat works for younger customers.) Her staff plays Advanced Brain Technologies' Music for Concentration when they need to focus, as do I. Cox recognizes classical structure as beneficial- except for meditation- especially when the music is melodic and soothing. It is also worth noting, as Lee Starkey observed, that this music comes from a time when musical craftsmanship was seriously cultivated and highly regarded; it's "really well done."

Deena Grossman, of classical crossover label Moonbridge, sees the "instrumental color palette-the beauty of the sound itself" as critical. She tries her sounds on relatives and friends, "just ordinary people," and creates music they enjoy.

Horwedel believes Classical does much the same thing as "New Age," transporting listeners to a place of haven and clarity. Leeds finds that synthesized and even sampled music fail to have the same effect on the nervous system as "real" instrument vibrations, and both he and Horwedel staunchly support acoustic instruments. Besides, he adds, Classical offers "some of the most beautiful sound on the planet."



The Academic Image

The perception of an elite classical club requiring, as Horwedel puts it, "a secret decoder ring" does not fit Cultural Creatives. People need to understand that it's okay not to like all this music and not to know much about it. He encourages retailers, however, to investigate a bit and help open a door for their customers, the kind of competitive service this market demands. Spring Hill will release *The Nature of Music* (book and two related CDs), in January 2001, about how sound (primarily classical) can enhance life. And in November, Inner Traditions will release Joshua Leeds' new book and CD, *The Power of Sound*.

"New consumer" guru Paul Ray recently wrote that a product "can be any style so long as it's the authentic version and comes with a story." So buy Classical from sources you trust who can give you information about the music, including its precise appeal to your customers. Starkey seems to agree. He feels that whatever is done well will do well, especially when it's produced by a genuine innovator. Those following on others' coattails may do okay; but his customers seem to be up on current trends and appreciate the leaders.

Some of the most fulfilling feedback on *The Mozart Effect* comes to Horwedel from customers who purchased the music for its perceived health benefits and then found it opened a whole new world of aesthetics. Ted Cox feels New Age listeners will continue to be excited about new interpretations that are "non-threatening and non-intellectual." They remember classically trained artists such as George Winston and Wendy Carlos, whose desire for new forms of expression fostered New Age music. Now Bill sees this coming full circle, with Classical integrated more into New Age and welcomed into the New Consciousness market-place. He finds this fitting, as much of Classical has sacred or spiritual intentions.

And don't forget mothers and children. Even if people don't understand Classical themselves, many want the traditional "best" for their kids.

Deena Grossman summarized the majority view by saying that Classical must reach out and connect in some specific way (such as healing, learning, or women's topics). Her company is producing a visual arts series, the first CD of which, *Waterlilies Visions of Monet*, did well at museums and art/garden outlets. This September they will release (though not for general retail distribution) *Moonlit Gardens*, Asian-influenced music relating to Chinese art.



The Horizon

We'll be seeing more crossover in the near future, says Cox- more Classical/New Age and Classical/World, especially Middle Eastern, Mexican, South American, and Pacific Rim. Caldean hopes for more therapeutic "Classical." Horwedel views today's fusions as a ramp into more traditional music; he believes many of *The Mozart Effect* listeners (expect two new volumes in September) will almost certainly become interested in the originals. Label DGM/Discipline Global Mobile just started a Classical series called *Present Moments*, stating, "This music does have a New Age appeal."

Music makers and producers such as Dawn and Deena will continue their struggle to "stretch people's ears and open people's minds" just the right amount.

We will learn more. Joshua Leeds' resources already know that plucked strings create gentle entrainment pulses; simple solos and duets soothe fatigued nervous systems; high pitches (flutes, high strings, upper registers of the piano) "charge" us alertness; while bass sounds tend to "discharge" over-stimulated systems. To reach those not ready for Classical, Leeds will soon apply his resonance and entrainment principle to Jazz, World, and Rock. He sees "conscious sound awareness" as the next step in responsible health and wellness practice.

When we understand why we're listening to what, and how it is affecting us, we will be able to "appreciate all music a whole lot more."



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