Keeping out-of-print CDs in circulation

By David Weininger, Globe Correspondent  |  August 31, 2007

Ask any classical music enthusiast about a favorite piece, and sooner or later she'll start ticking off her favorite recordings thereof. This sort of semi-obsessive cataloging is part of the genre's lingua franca. Yet especially during the CD era it's become increasingly difficult to access the full richness of classical recording history. Major labels have become notorious for releasing a new CD with great fanfare, only to quietly drop it from their catalog a few years later. It's not uncommon for a review of a new recording to conclude with a sentiment along these lines: "Get it now, while you can."

ArkivMusic, an online retailer that launched in 2002, is out to reverse that trend and restore as much of the deep catalog as possible. In addition to stocking every classical CD in print, it now offers what it calls ArkivCDs: reissues of out-of-print CDs produced on demand for the consumer. The project began three years ago; as of this writing, the company has made more than 3,700 recordings available in this way.

Eric Feidner, ArkivMusic's president and cofounder, says that the ArkivCD program grew out of the company's original mission, which was to build an efficient distribution system for classical recordings. "We built this database structure geared to classical music that makes it easy to find every available recording of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which is something you can't really do elsewhere," he says by phone from his office in Connecticut.

"When we started ArkivMusic - and it's only progressed further since then - there were actually more recordings in our database that were out of print than in print." The brief shelf life is usually explained by the expense of printing and warehousing a title that may sell only a few hundred CDs per year, if that.

Feidner and his cofounders, who have all logged several years in the retail music business, realized that the labels' woes were an
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opportunity. "We felt that the way to do it was to license the recordings from the label and, rather than doing standard manufacturing replication runs for them all, we would store all the components digitally - the music and the packaging elements," he explains.

The average ArkivCD costs $15, comparable to a standard new CD. The music is burned onto a high-quality CD-R, the sound quality identical to the original. When Arkiv launched the program, the packaging was fairly basic, with reproductions of the cover art and tray card.

"Since then we've gotten a lot of customer feedback, that people wanted the liner notes," Feidner says. Starting this year, all new ArkivCDs include the original booklets, up to 50 pages. (He adds that in about a month they'll be able to go up to 200 pages, allowing operas with full librettos.)

Feidner says he's been amazed at the response the CDs have gotten, with at least one sale of 90 percent of the 3,700 titles.

The benefits involve both depth and breadth. There will always be listeners eager to scour one more version of Strauss's Four Last Songs or Beethoven's late piano sonatas for fresh insights. Or consider the six overtures by the neglected Baroque composer Francesco Veracini. There was only one available recording of these lovely works, on the Naxos label, before Arkiv brought back a 1994 collection of five overtures in performances by Musica Antiqua Köln under conductor Reinhard Goebel. The Naxos recording is decent, but you'd much rather have Musica Antiqua's musicianship and Goebel's energetic leadership.

There are plenty of items of local interest, including 44 recordings by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Among them are such treasures as Michael Tilson Thomas's early-'70s collection of music by Ives, Ruggles, and Piston, and Charles Munch conducting Wagner excerpts with soprano Eileen Farrell. Also available are several entries of Seiji Ozawa's Mahler cycle, which can otherwise be had only in a complete box set.

In addition, there are 40 ArkivCDs with James Levine conducting, including complete cycles of symphonies by Brahms and Schumann and an invaluable collection of orchestral works by Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern with the Berlin Philharmonic.

The ArkivCD project seems to be an exemplar of what Wired's Chris Anderson called "the long tail": a business model that relies on selling fewer copies of a wider selection of products. But while the long tail may be the future, there's something oddly backward-looking about Arkiv's project. It has become received wisdom that the future of music distribution is in downloading, and that the CD's days are numbered, as surely as the LP's were. Yet here is the ArkivCD, resurrecting recordings in a format whose obituary has already been written.

"For classical music, it's a whole different ball game," Feidner responds, pointing out that the genre is a niche that often has quite different priorities from the broader music market. He cites a survey the company did at the end of last year that confirmed what they already suspected: Classical music consumers are concerned about sound quality and thus loath to purchase music in compressed formats like MP3. They also want to have liner notes and vocal texts, and prefer hard copies to electronic formats like PDFs.
The bottom line, says Feidner, is that "overwhelmingly, our customers want to buy physical CDs."

And, he adds, the major labels' trend of decreasing the number of titles in print will only continue. While that's nothing to cheer about, it likely means a long life for the ArkivCD. "Someone's got to fill this demand for the physical product, and that's really where we see great potential, certainly for classical music."

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