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# The Life and Death of Classical Music

*Featuring the 100 Best and 20  
Worst Recordings Ever Made*

Norman Lebrecht



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**THE LIFE AND DEATH  
OF CLASSICAL MUSIC**

Norman Lebrecht, assistant editor of the *Evening Standard* in London and presenter of BBC's *lebrecht.live*, is a prolific writer on music and cultural affairs, whose weekly column has been called required reading. Lebrecht has written eleven books about music, and is also author of the novel *The Song of Names*, which won the Whitbread First Novel Award in 2003.

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Recordings Ever Made

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In memory of

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Klaus Tennstedt (1926–1998)

a studio nightmare

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## Introduction: Past Midnight

A week before Christmas 2004 the president of a major classical record label gave a farewell dinner for the vice-president of another, who was taking early retirement. It was an intimate affair in an exquisite restaurant in the Pimlico district of London. Present, besides the host, were another label chief, a jovial singers' agent and myself-just a few good friends and their tolerant partners who had heard all the best yarns many times over and knew exactly when to laugh.

As fine wines flowed and reputations were cheerily trashed, it struck me how unusual this party might seem to a greasy-pole climber in the more ruthless worlds of media, or car rentals. You could never imagine the head of Hertz, say, giving a feast for the number two at Avis. But classical recording had always been a convivial activity and, now that it was nearing nemesis, there was no reason to dispense with civilities. After all, as someone remarked, the band played on even as the *Titanic* sank.

A year earlier I had written a column announcing the end of classical recording. Nothing had since disturbed that thesis. Deutsche Grammophon, the arbiter of classical purity, was employing its star mezzo-soprano, Anne Sofie von Otter, in songs by the Seventies band Abba. *Gramophone*, the classical review magazine, had pop crooner Elvis Costello on its cover. Sony Classical, heir to the Columbia legacy, was forcibly merged with its historic rival Victor, now German owned. A century of recorded heritage was tossed from hand to corporate hand, as if worthless.

Productivity was at its lowest since the Great Depression, a trickle of two or three releases monthly from so-called major labels and another handful from sole traders. The days when DG and EMI each flourished ten new titles in the month before Christmas seemed mythical barely a decade on. As we sat past midnight retelling glories and follies, recalling indispensable records that were planned and never made and others that should never have seen light of laser, we shared a golden glow of something whose significance had yet to be defined. What, exactly, had the classical record contributed to modern civilization? Who had been the driving forces, and who the destroyers? Where did this hybrid object-part art, part engineering-fit into the kaleidoscope of contemporary culture? These questions had never been comprehensively addressed and the need to understand them acquired a tangible urgency as the last producers were turning out the lights.

Unlike photography, recording could not claim to be a pure art since the impetus was commercial. Nevertheless, by some sym-biotic quirk, the organs of recording acquired an artistic personality and a spiritual dimension. The Decca Sound differed materially, or so it was said, from RCA Living Stereo and both could be told apart from Mercury Living Sound. The act of making and playing a record involved a quasi-religious ritual: the cleansing of the surface, the placing of the needle. No private sanctum was complete without several versions of major works in divergent interpretations-the Beethoven symphonies conducted variously by Arturo Toscanini, Herbert von Karajan, Claudio Abbado, Simon Rattle, Nikolaus Harnoncourt. Whether this cult amounted culturally to more than a row of has-beens was impossible to adjudicate until a line was drawn beneath the recording century and the entirety was assessed as a single artefact.

From the endpoint, where we sat, it became clear that classical recording had changed the world in more ways than previously told. It had brought Western civilization within everyman's reach. No hamlet was too remote to hear Shakespeare and Goethe, Shostakovich and Gregorian chant. A child in Szechuan, enchanted by a sound, grew up into a celebrated virtuoso. Conversely, pentatonic Szechuan tunes, captured on early records, found their way into Western symphonies. Classical recording shrank the world to fit anybody's fist, long ahead of mass tourism and

multiculturalism.

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Certain recordings united nations in grief and reflection. A Bruckner symphony signalled, for Germans, the end of the Third Reich; Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings mourned, for Americans, the death of presidents Roosevelt and Kennedy. Classical recording, over the course of a century, reordered musical priorities. In 1900 Beethoven was the most important composer that ever lived. By 2000 he had given way to Mahler, a symphonist whose metamorphosis from non-person to most-popular was wrought not by live performance or broadcasts but through classical recordings by Leonard Bernstein and Otto Klemperer which changed musical taste.

That such a useful activity could collapse at the end of the century, supplanted by the froth of ephemeral celebrity, is a cultural loss of some magnitude, equivalent to the drowning of Venice. It came about when labels were pushed by corporate owners to chase the popular buck. Decca signed a quartet of girls in bodysuits. EMI embraced a *Playboy* centrefold. America's foremost cellist went hillbilly. A Welsh warbler gobbled up the promotion budget of Sony Classical, then declared that she was done with classics. A civilization was ending. It could not be allowed to die without eulogy or explanation.

I began, in my weekly newspaper column and on my website, to enumerate the milestones-the hundred classical records that, in some way or other, altered the world and its music. These were not necessarily the most perfect records, nor the most ambitious, but they were ventures which-singly or taken together-signified the legacy. A voluminous response from readers the world over revealed an engagement that was both catholic and passionate. It appeared that classical records mattered profoundly, even to people who never bought records and did not listen much. They were, in some way, a cornerstone of cultural certainty.

Readers wanted to know why. Why symphonies had been displaced by crossover, why the regular flow of durable masterpieces had stopped, why new artists were not selling. I had no empirical answer since the historical background was opaque and largely untold. The more I strove to select a hundred recordings by an objective criterion of cultural significance, the more I had to discover about the circumstances of their creation. Great recordings do not come about by accident, or stand alone in time. I needed to furnish the critical discussion of the hundred greatest recordings in this book with an account of how they came about, from Caruso's first scratchings to the serenity of CD. I expected this industrial history to be brief and uneventful, only to find myself overwhelmed by fantastical storylines. Who would have imagined that one famous label came about as the child of a Nazi war criminal and a concentration camp victim? Why would a strictly orthodox Jew finance a gay men's collective? What made one record chief fly to Hong Kong with a million dollars in two suitcases? These romances cried out to be investigated. Once word got round that I was writing the inside story of classical recording, artists, producers and executives opened their hearts and archives to my inquiries. Much of what follows is hitherto undocumented, the oral lore of a civilization that is no more.

Our farewell dinner ended in tears. Among the gifts on the table was a DVD recording of the late Carlos Kleiber, a conducting titan who had cost our departing friend millions of dollars in cancelled projects. Moisture welled in our friend's eyes. He thanked our host, hand on heart. He would watch the DVD as soon as he got home. Working, and mostly not working, with Kleiber had been an incomparable privilege. His executive life had been made tolerable by helping a few mortals of genius achieve a fragment of their potential. If the history of recording was over, so be it. The music would endure.

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PART I

**Maestros**

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## 1. Matinee

One afternoon in 1920, a young pianist sat down in a shuttered room in the capital of defeated Germany and played a Bagatelle by Beethoven. At the return of the main theme, one of his fingers fractionally strayed, touching two keys instead of one. 'Donnerwetter (dammit!),' cried Wilhelm Kempff. He looked around and saw crestfallen faces. 'That was very beautiful,' said the machine operator, 'but the recording is now ruined.'<sup>1</sup>

This lapse, recalled by Kempff years later, amounts to a defining moment in the annals of performance—the moment a musician realized that recording required a different discipline and temperament from public concerts. Kempff, had his finger slipped on stage, would have played on regardless, knowing that few would detect the flaw, or remember it afterwards. On record, though, the imperfection was engraved for all time, growing larger and uglier with each replay. There was no hiding place, no camouflage available on disc for inferior technique or inchoate interpretation. The artist stood exposed to eternal scrutiny, stripped of any illusory diversion.

Sound recording had begun in 1877 with the inventor Thomas Alva Edison shouting 'Mary had a little lamb' into a phonograph and acquired a mass market in 1902 with the first brass horn arias of the Neapolitan tenor Enrico Caruso. But the birth of recording as a musical act separate and distinct from live performance, came in 1920 with the undeletable exclamation of a German artist in the aftermath of the First World War. Kempff, a protege of Brahms and friend Joseph Joachim, was rooted in gaslight romanticism but sufficiently aware of swirling currents to realize that recording presented more than just an opportunity to earn a fee. What it offered, once an artist had overcome the fear of error, was the chance to achieve a perfect score. For the first time in cultural history, accuracy and speed transcended inspiration as the object of performance, and there was no shortage of young men like Kempff who wanted quite literally, to set a record with their playing.

Wiser heads demurred. The professional pianist Artur Schnabel, a man of lofty mind and caustic wit, argued that recording went 'against the very nature of performance' by eliminating contact between player and listener, dehumanizing the art.<sup>2</sup> Music, he said, was a one-time thing, once played never to sound the same again. Schnabel turned his back monumentally on mechanical impertinences. Kempff, meanwhile, faced fresh dilemmas moral and aesthetic. Recording, he discovered, was innately competitive. Where, before the war, no one could have asserted empirically that Ferruccio Busoni was a *better* pianist than Ignacy Jan Paderewski, now it was possible to measure Kempff against Wilhelm Backhaus, and, music in lap and stopwatch in hand, checking every note in the Moonlight Sonata and timing each movement against Beethoven's metronome mark, *prove* that Kempff was materially superior. Strife ensued. Artists became bitter enemies and listeners were confused. Soon, it was not enough to have one Moonlight in the living-room cabinet; two or three sets displayed intellectual breadth and civilized tolerance. Where emperors in Vienna once staged live contests between Mozart and Clementi, the suburban homeowner in Peck-ham

Pittsburgh now played Rachmaninov against Vladimir Horowitz for a satisfyingly close shave. An element of sporting competition entered the musical game.

Kempff, who lived to the great age of ninety-five, was a studio master. His articulation was explicit, the notes separated as if bejewelled, his interpretations eschewing an excess of individuality. He recorded the popular classics twice, bought a castle near Bayreuth and was exclusive to Deutsche Grammophon from 1935 to his death in 1991. Yet, while his records entered thousands of homes, Kempff was never a household name. Lacking stage magnetism, he did not visit London or New York until 1951 and many who queued for hours to hear Kempff repeat his estimable studio interpretations came away feeling defrauded. Where was the rapt-ness, the subtle variants of colour, when this nondescript little fellow sat upon an empty platform? Kempff, they complained, was a synthetic invention—a soloist who could never have flourished before the anonymity of recording. His fame came from work done in the dark, away from social and political realities. In his memoirs Kempff is untouched by the century's traumas, by Hitler or mass hysteria, unaware that, when he played in occupied Krakow, he was less than an hour's drive away from Auschwitz.<sup>3</sup>

Schnabel, by contrast, was acutely attuned to public mood and eventually dropped his resistance to recording on an assurance that his work would be sold only in Europe and the British Empire until American audiences had a chance to compare his living presence with the shellac substitute. The principle of eye contact remained uppermost in his mind. Gregarious and polyglot, a commanding presence at the keyboard, Schnabel created a new edition of the thirty-two Beethoven sonatas and played them serially, start to finish, in seven Berlin recitals for the 1927 centenary of the composer's death. He repeated the cycle twice in London while recording for His Master's Voice. The last box in the 100-disc series, sold by advance subscription, appeared in 1939. Schnabel, in this set, introduced a twin-edged concept of integrity: the complete works, performed by the supreme authority. But the idea of the complete cycle had another advantage in that it sold people things they never wanted or knew existed. Subscribers who signed up for the Moonlight, the Hammerklavier and the imposing opus III received, together with these summits, discs of less interesting sonatas. Schnabel's Beethoven showed that great composers could be marketed to the self-improving middle classes as a mantelpiece essential, like *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the plays of Shakespeare and a potted aspidistra.

Schnabel did not take easily to recording and the producer had to bring in his pretty niece to turn pages to give him an illusion of audience. 'I suffered agonies and was in a state of despair,' he reported. 'Everything was artificial—the light, the air, the sound—and it took me quite a long time to get the company to adjust some of their equipment to music.'<sup>4</sup> The recordings, however, are the antithesis of synthetic. They ripple with spontaneity and are riddled with wrong notes, scintillating in their contempt for precision and their search for inner meaning. Schnabel, said the Chilean pianist Claudio Arrau on his death in 1951, was the first 'to illustrate the concept of the interpreter as the servant of music rather than the exploiter of it'.<sup>5</sup>

His record allies had no qualms about exploitation. They took Schnabel's notion of integrity and sold it as doorstoppers to a world that furnished its homes with big boxes. If Kempff's expletive defined music *ex machina*, Schnabel's blessing put the whole of Beethoven with

Sounds that were collected before these events are chiefly of archaeological interest. To listen through aural debris to Francesco Tamagno (1850–1905), Verdi's original Otello, or to Alessandro Moreschi (1858–1922), the last castrato, is a fascinating experience but one that cannot be endured for much longer than holding one's head down a wishing well. The pitch wobbles, the static obtrusive and any impression of the singer's musicality requires an imaginative leap on the listener's part. Mighty Melba comes forth enfeebled, Tetrazzi underpowered, Galli-Curci unbeautiful. Mint copies of these objects fetch thousands of dollars (a prolific collector was the oil billionaire, John Paul Getty), but artistic satisfaction is hard to come by on these hand-cranked receptacles. The first recordings to overcome extraneous noise were ten arias taken by a young American, Fred Gaisberg, from a bumptious Neapolitan, Enrico Caruso, in a Milan hotel one floor above the suite where Verdi, the year before, had died. Gaisberg, as a kid in Washington DC, had hung around after school with men who tinkered in sheds. A useful pianist, winner of a city scholarship, he accompanied singers and whistlers on Edison cylinders, fretting at their inadequacy. In 1893 he met Em Berliner, a German-Jewish immigrant who had invented a flat disc and was, besides, 'the only one of the many people I knew connected with the gramophone who was genuinely musical and possessed a cultured taste'.<sup>6</sup> Gaisberg, aged nineteen, offered himself to Berliner as an all-purpose factotum, playing the piano when required, raising cash, demonstrating the disc to Bell Laboratories, finding artists. He was the first professional producer of records and, a hundred years later, many still considered him the greatest.<sup>7</sup> In the trinity of recording fathers, Edison engraved sound on surface, Berliner invented the gramophone and Gaisberg created the music industry.

Berliner joined up with Eldridge Johnson, a motor mechanic of Camden, New Jersey, to manufacture gramophones as the Victor Talking Machine Company. Gaisberg set up his first recording studio in 12th Street, Philadelphia, across the river from Camden. In 1898 Berliner sent him permanently to the London branch of his Gramophone and Typewriter Company, soon to be renamed His Master's Voice after an emblematic painting of dog and horn was bought from a passing artist, Francis Barraud. A Berliner nephew who sailed with Gaisberg went on to Hanover, to found the Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft. Twenty-five years old and full of vim, Gaisberg roamed with his brother Will as far out as the Russian Caucasus and down into India, capturing remote sounds of throat singers and wedding bands for late imperial customers. The arch-producer never married; the gramophone was the love of his life.

At La Scala, Milan, in March 1902, he liked the leading tenor in Alberto Franchetti's ephemeral opera, *Germania*. Gaisberg approached Enrico Caruso the morning after through a pianist, Salvatore Cottone, and asked if he would like to make records. The singer, alert to imminent debuts at Covent Garden and the Metropolitan Opera, demanded £100 for ten arias. Gaisberg requested authority from London and was curtly refused: 'Fee exorbitant, absolutely forbid you to record.' He went ahead regardless. Short, fat and ugly, Caruso was an unlikely star but the public was swayed in those days by what it heard, not by what it saw on stage and in dim press photographs. On record, Caruso sang with enviable ease, his

baritone quality stabilizing the recorded image and overcoming pop and crackle. The result was an instant bestseller, the first gramophone hit. By the end of the year he was world famous and fabulously rich. Within two decades he died of pleurisy in August 1921, aged forty-eight, while mastering Eleazar in Halévy's *La Juive* – he earned \$2 million. Thirty years later Mario Lanza's movie of his life took in \$19 million. It was a voice that never stopped selling (CD 1, p. 160).

Caruso's Red Labels convinced the rest of his profession that recording was more than just a gimmick. The first ten tracks offer an object lesson in good breathing and authentic verismo style. Caruso, said Luciano Pavarotti, who recorded a pop elegy to his memory, 'is the tenor against whom all the rest of us are measured ... With his incredible phrasing and musical instincts he came closer than any of us to the truth of the music he sang.'<sup>8</sup> After Caruso, other singers recorded routinely. The last Golden Age tenor to hold out was the thunderous Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin, whose resistance melted on witnessing the triple benefits: prosperity, fame, publicity and a ticket to posterity. The retired Adelina Patti, living in a castle in Wales, summoned Gaisberg to perpetuate her formidable voice. '*Maintenant*,' she exclaimed on hearing his playback, '*maintenant je sais pourquoi je suis Patti*' (now I know why I am Patti).

Other instruments were less convincing. Orchestras, shrunken and warped, sounded as if locked in a bathroom and heard through a rush of water. Fiddlers squeaked, pianists tinkled. To musical ears and an idealistic mind, the results were odious and the outcome obvious. Gaisberg, writing from Milan in April 1909, told his kid brother to cash in and get out:

Say, Will, I have been doing a good deal of thinking of late and have come to the conclusion that the Gramo business is finished. The novelty is gone and days of big profits are over. Gramophone (shares) will never see 40/- again and the Co will settle down to a basis of eight to 10% dividends ... It will be better for them to liquidate right away than to drag on indefinitely ... I feel very discouraged generally about the outlook of things and only want to tell you that this is your last chance to save money.<sup>9</sup>

Few in the business believed that recording would last any longer than such parallel gimmicks as the stereoscope and the hot-air balloon. Already there were other mechanical means of receiving music at home. Marcel Proust, repined in his Paris bed, would listen to Pelleas and Melisande from the Opera night after night down the tinny telephone. The First World War, with its portable gramophones and fevered demand for dance music, staved off the inevitable, but radio followed soon after with the first public broadcasts from Philadelphia in 1920 and live music from the British Broadcasting Company in London two years later. The Columbia label, founded in 1889 as Victor's chief competitor, went into liquidation. The remaining labels wrote off their patents and stock and signed up in 1925 with Bell, which had developed an electrical method of making recordings, based on telephone and microphone advances. The future, as Lenin was telling the Soviet Union, lay in electrification.

Electrical recording allowed artists to stand away from the microphone and orchestras to achieve verisimilitude. 'A whisper fifty feet away, reflected sound, and even the atmosphere of a concert hall could be recorded-things hitherto unbelievable,'<sup>10</sup> marvelled Gaisberg. The

electrical players were flatbed instruments with frontal speakers-an ignoble replacement for the magnificent horn, but the public response was enormous. In one week in 1926, Victrola sold \$20 million worth of Victrola players; its entire profit the year before had been just \$122,998. It was as if Caruso had been born all over again. In the sleepy Austrian town of Salzburg, a teenaged inventor, Wolfgang von Karajan, rigged up a player of his own making on the town bridge and turned up the volume. Within minutes the centre of the town was thick with crowds and he was ordered by the police to take the contraption down. 'Those people were dumbfounded,' noted his brother, the conductor Herbert von Karajan. 'The sound of music actually emerging from a box like that created a sensation.'<sup>11</sup>

It was the dawning of the age of mass entertainment and shared experience. Commentaries to a world heavyweight fight between Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey, relayed on radio, was released on five discs. The aviator Charles Lindbergh was recorded on landing after his maiden transatlantic flight. Fifteen glee clubs sang *Adeste Fideles* at the Met, a swelling of 4,850 voices. Church bells were recorded in English hamlets, birds singing in the Auvergne. The composers Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Rachmaninov, refugees from the Russian revolution, found a new home on records. Bela Bartok, who had roamed Balkan villages with a recording machine, worked the folklore he had collected into his string quartets-the first masterpieces to owe their existence to the act of recording. In Germany Paul Hindemith, Kurt Weill and Stefan Wolpe introduced disc playing in live recitals. Weill went so far as to compose a gramophone aria for his 1927 opera, *The Tsar Has Himself Photographed*.

Symphonies and string quartets continued to resist the medium. Discs could carry only four minutes of music and musicians had to plan side breaks. When Edward Elgar conducted his own works for Gaisberg, the set carried a health warning: 'The tempi on these records do not necessarily represent the intentions of the composer.' Richard Strauss, though, had no such qualms and professional conductors took to the studio, some reluctantly but almost without exception. A music industry photograph of 1929 traps five glowering maestros at a celebratory dinner in Berlin-Arturo Toscanini, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Bruno Walter, Otto Klemperer, Erich Kleiber; all were famed far beyond their cities as a result of making records.

Toscanini, artistic director at La Scala, premiered a work by Ottorino Respighi, *The Pines of Rome*, which interpolated a nightingale's song-the first recording to be incorporated with a concert work. In America, Leopold Stokowski arrayed his orchestra in a 'Philadelphia Sound', a benchmark for luxuriant precision. The repertoire grew more adventurous. Columbia, back in business for the 1928 centenary of Schubert's death, launched an international competition for composers to finish off the *Unfinished Symphony*, the result to be recorded. This was a medium ravenous for novelty, indiscriminate of taste. A label might put out jazz one day, a symphony the next. It was the era of anything goes.

And then it crashed. In the Wall Street aftershock, record sales in the US dropped from 100 million in 1929 to just 6 million the following year. In the UK, HMV and Columbia sales dropped from 30 million to 4.5 and the labels were forced into a merger as Electrical and Music Industries, Ltd. It was thirty years before EMI recovered its 1929 sales volume. Decca, a new record label, was taken over by a resourceful young Welshman called Edward Lewis, who bought part of US Brunswick and kept Decca afloat on Bing Crosby and Al Jolson imports.



In America, classical recording ceased and stars were fired by the dozen. 'I remember coming back to my office after lunch to find a cable reading "Dropping De Luca and Horowitz. Any interest?"' recalled Gaisberg's assistant, David Bicknell. 'And not only cables, the artists started to arrive in person. [Jascha] Heifetz was one of the first. Fred invited him to lunch.'<sup>12</sup> Gaisberg, in his circumspect way, rose above the panic. Nearing sixty, he held no executive title and earned less than the EMI directors, but he understood better than any man alive the dynamics of the industry. Gaisberg repeated his warning that recording could come to an end at any time. Its best hope was to preserve the best art of its time. 'He had wonderful instincts regarding the direction in which the whole gramophone industry was moving,' said Bicknell. 'And one of the decisions he took was to switch from recording small pieces-which had been the lifeblood of the record business since it started: that is, operatic arias, single piano pieces and so on-to building a library.'<sup>13</sup>

For Gaisberg, Schnabel's Beethoven cycle (CD 7, p. 167) was the cornerstone of a strategy that would remove classical recording from relative triviality to a plane of curatorial responsibility and economic tranquillity. Flimsy showpieces might sell well in times of plenty, but when the going got tough the world needed Beethoven as never before. By 1933, when the world again went to war, the Schnabel cycle had raked in profits of half a million dollars and Gaisberg was revered as a latter-day saint. To the Victorian mansion that EMI had bought on Abbey Road, in residential St John's Wood, Gaisberg brought the great and the good to inscribe an immortal legacy. Elgar conducted the teenaged Yehudi Menuhin in his violin concerto; Jascha Heifetz introduced the Sibelius concerto (CD 9, p. 170); Pablo Casals recorded Bach (CD 11, p. 172); Gigli, Supervia and Chaliapin sang their hearts out; and Paderewski, lion of Poland, inscribed his final testament. Gaisberg treated all artists with deference, yet without him few would have passed into history. Although British by acculturation, he embodied, in the view of his assistant Bicknell, 'many of the greatest American virtues, namely: first: his fearless interest in dealing with difficult, celebrated and formidable people, never hesitating to tell the truth whenever it was necessary, however unwelcome it might be. Second, his approachability. Finally, his youthful outlook which he retained right into old age.'<sup>14</sup> Gaisberg, who died, aged seventy-eight, in September 1951, had accompanied the industry of recording from toolshed beginnings to corporate establishment, shifting its centre of operations from inventor's America to investor's Britain. It would take the second world war and a brutal dictator to reverse the trend, placing classical records in the heart of a mass consumer market and the home of the brave.

The rise of fascism brought Italy's new Duce, Benito Mussolini, and its most important musician, Arturo Toscanini, into instant conflict. A totemic figure since he conducted the Requiem at Verdi's funeral, Toscanini was a fanatical precisionist in a land of lazy sunshine, a fundamentalist interpreter who preached fidelity to the letter of the score while making textual adjustments as he saw fit. Irresistibly propulsive, his performances of Italian operas and German symphonies were imbued with revivalist fervour. Trim, short and coal-eyed, Toscanini joined the 1919 fascist parliamentary list out of patriotic zeal but grew disillusioned with black-shirt violence. On the eve of Mussolini's March on Rome in October 1922, Toscanini said there was no man he would rather murder. He refused to let the Fasci

Hymn be sung, or the Duce's portrait hung, in La Scala. A tyrant to musicians, physically assaulting those who failed to meet his exacting expectations, Toscanini was resolute in defending his opera house from political indoctrination and from any authority greater than his own.

In April 1923 Mussolini visited La Scala and had his picture taken with its glowering music director. An uneasy truce ensued until, in 1929, Toscanini left La Scala to head the New York Philharmonic. Returning home in summer, he was roughed up by Party thugs and confined to house arrest. His anti-fascism crossed borders when Hitler came to power in Germany. Toscanini walked out on Bayreuth over a ban on Jewish artists and, at no small personal risk, sailed to Palestine to conduct an orchestra of refugees. Dismayed at the state of the world, he told his mistress in January 1935 that 'I would like to end my career next year, once I have finished my fiftieth year of conducting.'<sup>15</sup> He advised the New York Philharmonic to replace him with the Berlin conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, who was having a rough ride with the Nazis. When Furtwängler decided to stay in Germany, Toscanini never spoke to him again.

Word of Toscanini's frustration reached David Sarnoff, founder of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), which owned the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and Victor Records. Sarnoff, a Russian-born cigar-chomper with a reverence for high culture, sniffed an opportunity. He despatched Samuel Chotzinoff, brother-in-law of the violinist Jascha Heifetz, to offer Toscanini an NBC orchestra comprising the best musicians in America. His fee would be \$40,000, tax free, for twelve concerts-four times Philharmonic rates. Record royalties would provide a welcome nest-egg for the grandchildren. Toscanini signed on the line.

His return to America was heralded with a hyperbole worthy of the second coming (it was in fact, his third). An opinion poll in *Fortune* magazine showed that two out of five Americans knew his name. Sarnoff introduced him on air as 'the world's greatest conductor'. Twenty million tuned in on Christmas night 1937 to his inaugural concert, comprising Vivaldi's Concerto Grosso in D Minor, Mozart's Symphony No. 40 in G minor and the first symphony of Brahms. Toscanini was called back seven times to take his bows. The reviewers were awestruck. The *New York Times* called him 'predominant in his art'. The *Tribune* acclaimed 'a peak of unexampled popular success'. Chotzinoff informed *Cosmopolitan* readers that, for each nation, Toscanini was the 'supreme' interpreter of its music: for Germans in Beethoven and Wagner, for Austrians in Haydn, Mozart and Schubert, for the Italians in everything, the French in Debussy, the English in Elgar. He was the only conductor anyone would want to hear, which is exactly what Sarnoff wanted everyone to read.

When Pearl Harbor brought America into the war, Toscanini's anti-fascism made him a national hero. 'Your baton,' said President Roosevelt, 'has spoken with unmatched eloquence on behalf of the afflicted and the oppressed.' Everybody called him 'The Maestro' as if there were no other. 'He quite candidly believes that he is not merely the greatest conductor in the world, but the only good one,'<sup>16</sup> observed RCA Victor's musical director, Charles O'Connell, himself a part-time conductor.

'Sitting as close to Toscanini as I did,' wrote principal viola player William Primrose, '... I believed without qualification that everything he did was incontestable. After I left the orchestra and listened to him as a member of the audience I was no longer as certain.' 'Toscanini did not really like to make records,' wrote a fellow violist, Milton Katims. 'He

took no apparent interest in the problems involved and rarely, if ever, went into the control room to check the results of a take. But he was aware of the difference in the quality of sound of his records and those of other conductors.’<sup>18</sup>

Paramount as he was, his records were marred by the cramped acoustic of NBC’s Studio 8H, fracturing filigree timbres and exacerbating what Furtwängler would cruelly characterize as the ‘uncomfortable brilliance’ of American orchestral sound. ‘Excitement,’ wrote the composer Virgil Thomson, a lone sceptic in the critical clique, ‘is of the essence in Toscanini’s concept of musical performance.’ Even Thomson, though, admitted that ‘one gets hypnotised’.<sup>19</sup>

Sarnoff decreed that ‘all Toscanini records, regardless of any commitment to any other artist or any consideration of the necessities imposed by announcement, advertising, distribution and the like, must be put on the market within thirty days.’<sup>20</sup> The entire company was geared to magnify Toscanini’s indomitable image. O’Connell, a garrulous fellow who irked the Maestro with underpraise, was fired on his orders, never to work again. Sarnoff himself felt the lash when Toscanini, hearing that his orchestra was being used for classical pops concerts, refused to conduct again at NBC. Sarnoff talked him into making records with the splendid Philadelphia Orchestra at vast expense. Toscanini agreed, then vetoed the release. When Stokowski won hotly contested rights to the US premiere of Shostakovich’s Leningrad symphony, Toscanini got Sarnoff to wrest the piece off him and hand it over to the network’s number one maestro. Absolutism was never quite enough for him. At Carnegie Hall, in concert with his son-in-law Vladimir Horowitz, he raised \$1 million in war bond sales and a million more in the interval by auctioning off his score of The Star-Spangled Banner. On VE-Day he conducted the nation’s Victory Symphony. On 18 March 1948 Toscanini gave America’s first televised symphony concert.

His predominance reordered the hierarchies of recording. An industry that had waxed rich on singers and soloists now hinged upon the myth of a Mosaic leader who waved a stick in the desert air and produced an outpouring of sound. The maestro was to become the figurehead of classical labels. RCA signed Serge Koussevitsky in Boston and Philadelphia Eugene Ormandy, along with the prolific Stokowski. Columbia surged back into contention, bought in a 1938 poker game by William Paley, son of a Russian-Jewish cigar manufacturer and founder of the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). Paley snatched RCA’s ‘best record salesman’, a deceptive aesthete called Edward Wallerstein, who renamed Columbia records ‘Masterworks’ and boosted classical sales from just over \$1 million in 1939 to \$12 million in 1945.

The source of this prosperity was an English-born composer, Goddard Lieberson, whom Wallerstein hired as a maestro magnet. Tall, expertly manicured and witty in several languages, Lieberson at twenty-eight was a founder of the American Composers Alliance and a friend of Igor Stravinsky’s. He had written a romantic novel, *Three for Bedroom C*, that became a Gloria Swanson B-movie, and had a finger in many pies. Lieberson went on the road with an open chequebook. In Cleveland he signed the Christian militant Artur Rodzinski and in Minneapolis the high-octane Greek, Dimitri Mitropoulos. Both would be promoted by the label to the New York Philharmonic. In a flagrant turf war, Lieberson then poached Ormandy from RCA, which grabbed Pierre Monteux in San Francisco and Eugene Goossens in

Cincinnati. Both labels financed continental tours by their conductors, spreading symphonic  
gospels. Orchestral concerts became a central feature of urban life, sustained by returning  
servicemen, educated on the GI Bill. The brow of Middle America rose by several furrows.

Toscanini, who had sparked this cultural revolution, was too frail to savour its fulfilment.  
On 4 April 1954, after a memory lapse on air in Wagner's Tannhauser overture, he laid down  
his baton. At his death in 1957, just short of his ninetieth birthday, he left 160 recordings,  
a legacy of relentless tempi, rigid structures and febrile sonorities. His rivals in the icon  
Berlin photograph came into the rewards. Bruno Walter enjoyed an Indian summer on CBS  
Masterworks while Kleiber and Klemperer served Decca and Vox. Furtwängler bit his lip and  
signed for EMI. 'When I heard my first recording, I actually felt ill,' he said. His approach to  
conducting, the antithesis of Toscanini's 'ruthless clarity',<sup>21</sup> was conditioned by mood and  
moment. The Beethoven violin concerto, recorded in 1944 Berlin, was so darkly coloured  
it sounded like Götterdämmerung. The same work, recorded with Menuhin in 1947, was bathed  
in romantic regret. Furtwängler was a conductor for all seasons. In 1950s Vienna, two music  
students, Claudio Abbado and Zubin Mehta, joined the Philharmonic chorus in order to  
observe his mesmeric rehearsals. A ten-year-old Israeli kid, Daniel Barenboim, came by to  
seek his blessing. There was a priestly aura to this willowy, self-contradictory intellectual.

Furtwängler's death in 1954 closed a creative chapter in conducting history, but no sooner  
was he gone than his aesthetic influence redoubled. Conductors aimed to synthesize  
Furtwängler's cerebral instinctuality on record with the metronomic exactitude of Toscanini.  
The resultant mongrel, known as 'Toscwänglerism', delighted the record industry, which  
thought it had achieved the best of both worlds.

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## 2. Middlemen

It had taken half a century for record labels to grow an identity. Back in 1914 there were seventy-eight labels, from Aerophone to Zonophone. Mergers, liquidations and transatlantic alliances reduced the number but not the confusion. EMI shared its 'dog and horn' with RCA in the US. Decca was known in America as 'London'. EMI issued US Columbia and Victor products in Europe. Both US labels were owned by major broadcasters. In Britain, EMI and Decca regarded radio as the enemy.<sup>1</sup> US labels were run by Jews; in Britain there was hardly a Jew in studio or boardroom.

Over time, house style evolved into brand. RCA stood for big stars, big sound; CBS had a liberal, epicurean image: one was Middle America, the other Manhattan; one Republican, the other Democrat; one was market leader, the other tried harder. RCA inhabited the Rockefeller Center; CBS recorded downtown on 30th Street in a deconsecrated Greek Orthodox church. In Britain, EMI was conservative, Decca radical; one British bulldog, the other sleek Siamese. EMI occupied a mansion in St John's Wood. Decca's studios were eight bus stops north in Broadhurst Gardens, West Hampstead, an area thick with continental immigrants.

High-profile producers provided a finishing touch to label style. Goddard Lieberson, the face of CBS Masterworks, was a man about town, usually seen with Vera Zorina, movie-star wife of George Balanchine. 'He worked very hard at it, putting himself about-it was not easy being on first-name terms with Noel [Coward] and Marlene [Dietrich],'<sup>2</sup> said a colleague. Zorina married Lieberson in January 1946. The party was given by opera's glamour pair Licia Pons and Andre Kostelanetz. As a wedding gift, Paley made Lieberson president of Masterworks.

His decisive act was to use the label as a newspaper, alighting on the new Broadway shows and bringing them out on record just as the reviews hit the streets. *Kismet* went into studios three days after curtain-up and was on sale in a week. *South Pacific*, with Ezio Pinza and Mary Martin, ran 1,900 nights on Broadway, 2,700 in London, and sold a million records. Lieberson, ecstatic, plunged the profits into high art and core heritage. Voices from the American Civil War appeared on Masterworks, along with the forbidding atonalism of Schoenberg and Webern. For the first time, a label took on the complete works of a living composer, its director's best friend. 'I am a Masterwork,'<sup>3</sup> said Igor Stravinsky, cherishing the accolade.

CBS was young, hungry and punching above its weight. Its scientists came up with a record that played forty minutes a side, ten times as long as standard 78 rpms. Peter Goldmark, nephew of the Hungarian composer, had been listening to the Toscanini Horowitz recording of the second Brahms piano concerto (CD 12, p. 173) when, irritated by disc changes ('like having the phone ring at intervals while you're making love'<sup>4</sup>) he whipped out a ruler and counted eighty grooves to the inch, calculated how many would contain a symphony and

what speed they would have to play. One-third of one hundred-thirty-three and one-third rotations per minute-was the answer.

Wallerstein warned that the long-playing record would damage pop singles, but Paley was keen to score points off Sarnoff and in April 1948 summoned his RCA rival to hear the new format. 'Within a few bars of audition,' said Goldmark, 'Sarnoff leaped out of his chair. He played [the LP] for ten seconds and then switched back to seventy-eight. The effect was electrifying, as we knew it would be ... Turning to Paley, Sarnoff said loudly and with some emotion "I want to congratulate you and your people, Bill. It is very good."' <sup>5</sup>

No sooner was he back at Rockefeller Center than Sarnoff ordered his boffins to come up with a competing format, the 45 rpm extended-play EP. On 21 June 1948, at the Waldorf Astoria, CBS Masterworks launched the LP with 100 new albums, topped by Nathan Milstein in the Beethoven violin concerto and a Frank Sinatra selection. Uptake was slow at \$4.85 a disc and \$30 a player, but Lieberson's South Pacific hit the stacks ten months later and converted America to the LP. RCA's format, useless for classical, proved perfect for pop. The schism sharpened: CBS went highbrow, RCA low.

Jazz masters, excited by the chance to play lengthy improvisations, flocked to the church on 30th Street. 'After Columbia started LP, we became the hottest label in jazz,' said producer George Avakian. 'Miles [Davis] saw what was going on, so he kept after me because he knew that if he were successful on Columbia that would be far better for him than any other label.' <sup>6</sup> Dave Brubeck, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk followed the sensitive producer John Hammond. The first Davis album was named *Miles Ahead*, for that was where the label now was.

Other technologies were unreeling. In a San Francisco garage, a demobbed GI called Jack Mullin was tinkering with a pair of Magnetophon tape machines that he had taken with an officer's permission from a radio studio south of Frankfurt-am-Main. Mullin informed the crooner Bing Crosby, a nervous broadcaster, that he could pre-record parts of his radio show. Crosby appointed Mullin his producer and both CBS and NBC embraced magnetic tape. There would be no more cutting grooves into molten wax. Tape let musicians retake sections of work and create a recording from multiple versions. The pace of change was picking up, and the next development was just round the corner.

In Britain, Decca was first to seize the future and EMI last. As Decca went over to LP, EMI announced it would 'continue to produce standard (78-rpm) records in undiminished quantities'. <sup>7</sup> It took four years for EMI to sack its managing director, Sir Ernest Fisk, in which time (the next chairman told Wallerstein) his procrastination had practically put them out of business. <sup>8</sup> EMI, like many post-war British firms, was run by 'captains of industry', a term which denoted recent army service at modest rank. Executives wore pin-striped trousers and musicians were sent home if they turned up without suit and tie. War raged between constituent labels. David Bicknell took over Gaisberg's HMV; Walter Legge ran (British Columbia; Oscar Preuss was head of Parlophone. If Preuss let slip that he was doing a concerto, Legge would sneer 'awfully sorry, old chap-I did that last month,' <sup>9</sup> and make over with the idea.

A natural musician, half-trained but with an ear for the extraordinary and a certainty of

style, Legge was an egotistical intriguer with a sadistic streak. Rumpled and smoke-wreathed, he was a menace to lone women in dark corridors. 'I was the first of what are called "producers" of records,'<sup>10</sup> he bragged. 'I was the Pope of recording.'<sup>11</sup> During the war he had organized concerts for the forces and put together a band of London's finest musicians for EMI. Unknown to EMI, the Philharmonia was wholly owned by Legge, who took a royalty on its records as a supplement to his salary.

He refashioned EMI around two conductors, both signed in Vienna in January 1946 at a time when they were under an Allied ban. Wilhelm Furtwängler had been Hitler's favourite conductor and Herbert von Karajan a puppet of propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels (until he married a half-Jewish woman in 1942 and took a career dive). Both were soon cleared by a tribunal but Furtwängler could not forgive Karajan for having tried to usurp his position in Berlin. Legge, knowing their antipathy, played the conductors cruelly off against each other. While in Vienna he signed a dozen singers, among them the bombshell Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, whom he later married.<sup>12</sup> They made an incongruous couple, the roly-poly Englishman and his curly-haired blonde, and together they posed as the creative face of EMI while Furtwängler and Karajan racked up the raves.

David Bicknell, Legge's corporate antipode, was 'a decent sort of chap, happiest at Haymarket amid a pile of contracts'.<sup>13</sup> He married a manly Italian violinist, Gioconda de Vito, with a faint moustache and variable intonation. Legge circulated ribaldries about their sexuality. Bicknell once laid a friendly hand on his shoulder. 'Touch me again,' snarled Legge, 'and I will kill you.'<sup>14</sup> Legge was always on the go, Bicknell stayed home. Legge lived high on expense accounts, Bicknell was frugal. A producer, called to his house in the middle of the night to unravel a Legge crisis, was received by Bicknell in a simple iron bedstead, an army lamp on the table. Bicknell, a public school man, received regular promotions at EMI. He wound up as head of the International Artists Department, controlling Legge's contracts. When Legge threatened that Karajan would quit unless he, Legge, was named sole producer, Bicknell delivered a masterly put-down. 'The Company,' he said, 'has never accepted the stipulation that an artist's contract should be dependent on the availability of one of its servants.'<sup>15</sup>

Legge, in his own mind, was nobody's servant. He reduced artists to tears and drove the young Kathleen Ferrier to leave EMI and join Decca (CD 14, p. 176). His conduct after the Beethoven concert that reconsecrated the Bayreuth Festival in 1951 was recalled by Furtwängler's appalled widow, Elisabeth:

Walter Legge came in and, like a child, my husband looked at him and just said 'Nah?' I wanted Legge's reaction, as he thought a lot of him. 'I have heard much better Ninths from you,' was his reply ... You can't know how this affected him! Immediately he thought 'Something must have happened, there must have been something that was no good.' He did not sleep at all right through the night and then the next morning we had to go to Bayreuth again, and he asked Wieland Wagner: 'Please tell me, how was the Ninth Symphony yesterday?' and he said: 'It was just marvellous.' But Furtwängler was still distressed and uncertain. As I was driving him home to Salzburg, suddenly he said: 'Stop.' He got out of the car and walked away-for almost 30 minutes he was gone and I started to be afraid. Then he

was back and he said: 'Right, we can go on now, that is all finished.' He was a big walker, he walked to make himself free.<sup>16</sup>

Furtwängler accused Legge of 'an outrageous personal breach of trust'<sup>17</sup>; Sir Thomas Beecham referred to him as 'a mass of egregious fatuity'.<sup>18</sup> But rival producers conceded that 'over and over again he made records that were the envy of all of us'.<sup>19</sup> His artists included the pianist Dinu Lipatti, Solomon and Claudio Arrau, the young conductors Guido Cantelli, Carlo-Maria Giulini and Wolfgang Sawallisch. In July 1952 Legge threatened to resign unless he got the go-ahead to sign a fat Greek soprano at La Scala. His first recording with Maria Callas was *Tosca* (CD 23, p. 186). It became the biggest selling opera of all time and Callas never worked with any other producer.

Legge launched in America under the sign of the Recording Angel—'a small, well-fed cherub who seems to be doodling with a long quill'.<sup>20</sup> Angel, run by opera enthusiasts Dario and Dorle Soria, had the opera racks to itself since Lieberson insisted that Americans 'don't like opera—they like singers and are content to hear them over and over in the same arias'.<sup>21</sup> Angel was in no position to wrestle with American giants but it carved a distinct market share albeit of a conservative tint. Legge was averse to modern music and living composers, looking resolutely backwards. It was the other British label that waved the banner of progress.

Decca was democracy incarnate. Having survived the choppy 1930s by the narrowest of margins, its engineers joined the war with gusto, inventing all manner of radar and navigation devices and exploring the outer rim of sonic science and the bottoms of the world's oceans. Back from the depths, Decca in June 1945 launched full frequency range recordings – ffr, for short, 'the first time anyone could hear the full range of frequencies the ear could detect'.<sup>22</sup> Decca's navigator department, which continued to develop marine systems for Nato, was the most profitable in the company for years ahead, a hedge against classical losses.

Limitlessly inventive, engineers were the driving force at Decca and a legend across the industry. 'Producers with other labels tended to dictate to the engineers exactly what they wanted and what [equipment] should be used, all without any explanation of context. At Decca, engineers and producers listened to operas and recordings ages before the first session of a project. It was a real team, and in terms of pay they were treated equally,'<sup>23</sup> noted a leading producer. Where Legge expected his engineers to lug all the equipment, at Decca everyone pitched in.

Exceptionally in class-ridden Britain, Decca demolished social barriers. Arthur Haddy, the chief sound engineer, spoke in a thick Essex Estuary accent and called everybody 'boy'. His number two, Kenneth Wilkinson, would sit at the console, eyes shut, a Player's cigarette drooping from his lips, his fingers touching the buttons of the mixers like a clinical diagnostician's. In rehearsal breaks Wilkie would walk around the studio adjusting musicians' chairs. If he disliked the tempo he would mutter 'my daughter couldn't dance to that',<sup>24</sup> and



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