

ON MAKING A STUDIO RECORDING

Advice to Composers, Soloists, and their Agents

by Joel Eric Suben

Anyone contemplating a commercial studio recording project today faces a significant outlay of money. Maximizing the outcome of such an expenditure is the subject of this essay. Some 20 years of organizing, executing and supervising professional



The author on the Charles Bridge, Prague, May 2002,
after recording in Olomouc. Photo: Jon W. Bauman

studio recordings—mostly with large orchestras but often with choruses and with small chamber ensembles—have taught me many lessons. Let me share some of them now.

The recording scene today

The decline of the retail market in CD recordings has considerably reduced standard Classical repertoire recording activity; contemporary art-music recording, always marginal, has seen smaller declines. Record labels have consolidated; online dissemination through streaming and related venues has cut into CD sales. Yet the

studio recording of orchestras and choruses for commercial distribution takes place much as it has for decades.

Although composers seem chronically wary of the impracticality writing for large orchestra, the activity of symphonic, opera, choral, and chamber music composition continues unabated, and the urge to compose for orchestra cannot be extinguished. To meet the needs of composers, a cadre of recording-for-hire operations, mostly U.S.-based, mostly for-profit businesses, stands ready to serve those about to take the plunge.

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Rise of the New [Old-]World [recording] Order

The opening of former Soviet-bloc orchestras to worldwide markets around 1990 attracted some ambitious, savvy entrepreneurs who profited from low-cost professional recording venues. Throughout the '90's American composers acted increasingly to satisfy their desires to hear faithful recorded performances of their works, many of them for the large instrumentations we see in the scores of Penderecki and Lutosławski. The new recording-for-hire enterprises fed these desires with promises of super-cheap recordings in Eastern Europe.

With recording deals combining studio recording, production, and public commercial CD distribution on the enterprise's own label, the number of CD labels and releases grew. A golden age for American composers—and small American businesses—was at hand.

Hiring local middlemen, the enterprises relied on local conductors who accepted massive projects (as did the orchestras) for very low compensation and worked efficiently by speaking the orchestra's language. Enterprises economized on preparation time by packing into a three-hour recording session as much as 20 minutes of orchestral music. What had begun as a way for beleaguered Eastern European orchestras to survive in an era of shrinking government support quickly morphed into a visible sweatshop environment among orchestras showing signs of exploitation fatigue.

Enterprises economized by packing too much music into [i.e., overloading] recording sessions.

You get what you pay for

Under a delirious wash of orchestral sound, many composers found the experience itself rather intoxicating, and their critical faculties were suspended. Other composers, more accustomed to technical and aesthetic accountability, balked. (So too did one highly competent and conscientious Polish producer, whose comments drew immediate dismissal followed by a vicious round of slander from the impresario.)

Some deficiencies became apparent. The chosen local conductors for the American music sessions were not among the leaders in their own lands (who quickly realized that accepting such assignments would do little to serve their own careers).

And Eastern European orchestras, grounded almost exclusively in nineteenth-century repertoire (increasingly so going farther East), revealed limitations of flexibility in adapting to the hair-trigger rhythms, clipped articulation, and metric changes of many American composers since mid-century. The introduction of a few American conductors did little to improve the situation.



Enter Save The Music, inc.

Numbering more each year, dissatisfied customers ultimately fueled my own decision to increase my recording activity in Eastern Europe. After examining the scores of several composers who found the house conductor less effective with their works than with orchestras, I organized Save The Music, inc. and saw its incorporation as a tax-exempt not-for-profit entity by January 1993. My personal experiences as a composer informed the principles on which I began to record large numbers of orchestral, operatic, and choral works (and eventually chamber music):

Dissatisfied composers fueled my recording activity in Eastern Europe.

1. concentrate on strengths (in my case, orchestral conducting, score study/preparation)
2. avoid involvement with the CD release—leave that to the client (foundation, composer, soloist, or agent)
3. demand the composer's presence at all recording sessions
4. insist on having physical possession of all performance material two months before the recording date
5. pursue concerns of notation and orchestration with the composer, even to the point of risking his/her indignation at being challenged on such points
6. ensure sufficient session time for the orchestra to master the work in recording
7. offer free-of-charge no-obligation exploratory consultation based on preliminary study of the score(s) in question
8. be obsessive about communicating, well in advance, with the composer and/or soloist about every detail, no matter how small, which may be open to question and which bears upon the work and its realization

1. concentrate on strengths, 2. leave CD release to client—Being in the business of organizing studio recordings (and, in recent years, public performances) is essentially a full-time calling. While I can make (and often have made) specific recommendations to clients regarding the choice of CD label, I focus on the business at hand: the preparation of the score itself. This is true even on those occasions when another conductor is leading an STM session.

3. demand the composer's presence—This has proved difficult to enforce, particularly with deceased composers. (Two composers actually died shortly after delivering their scores

to me.) Among composers who for a variety of reasons have remained absent while I recorded their music, all would have preferred to be present. The reason is clear: **even an experienced composer may find, while plunged in medias res, elements to change: balance, dynamics, tempo, even pitches, rhythms, and registers.** The composer's absence limits his/her ability to influence the result.

4. insist on having material 2 months in advance of recording—This has helped find many missing pages early enough to save the integrity of the recording. No one individual, not even a control freak like me, can proofread hundreds of pages of material note for note. While I can relate several anecdotes involving anal-retentive composers caught onsite with improperly assembled material, the very least one can do is to insure that no pages are missing. Warning to **composers: proofread your material; if possible, have others proofread it.**

5. pursue concerns of notation and orchestration with the composer—This includes **insistence on proper cues in orchestra material.** Much costly time has been lost because of composers' inattention to cues. Regarding orchestration, an anecdote: On one occasion, because I had not sufficiently badgered a composer about the danger of writing for a section of string basses unaccompanied by any other instruments, I paid for that "kindness" by spending my lunch hour between sessions writing out a new 'cello part.

6. ensure sufficient session time—This relates to the previously cited practice of overloading by recording-for-hire enterprises and the realities of digital recording in post-Iron-Curtain Eastern Europe: **Orchestras generally (with one or two exceptions) no longer hold separate rehearsals prior to recording a work.** Even in possession of material 6 weeks in advance of the recording, most Eastern European orchestras (again, with few exceptions) will play through a work *prima vista* at the first recording session. **The lay of the land: brief polishing of the most challenging places in the score, then immediately to intensive recording of the whole work.** Gone are the days of long rehearsals followed by recording from a point of technical mastery. Nonetheless, **with careful preparation of material, and above all, with a conductor committed to learning the score, one can achieve a genuine experience of music captured in recording.**

7. offer exploratory consultation, 8. communicate—No-obligation consultation is simply not offered among purveyors of professional studio recording today. Though advised many times by friends and loved ones to charge a fee for this time-consuming service, I have declined to do so on the grounds that every composer deserves such preliminary consultation without obligation. Because every orchestra has its own strengths and weaknesses, and because the cost of engaging orchestras varies greatly, I consider **my service** to include **advising the composer** on the most economical and auspicious venue in which to realize his/her project.

You don't get what you pay for

Encountered along the road to recording some 500 works by ca. 125 composers: a number of composers and soloists who pursue record labels and performers for their alleged star quality in the hope of catching some hired luster and career advancement. This strategy, coming directly from the box-office guidebook of every concert manager, has generated for me and for Save The Music, inc. many sadder-but-wiser clients who had poured thousands of dollars of their own savings into recording projects which ultimately failed.

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The failure, disappointment, and resentment invariably stem from:

- the conductor's inability, or disinclination, to master the score
- the impresario's failure to schedule sufficient session time with the orchestra

It's not difficult to understand the impulse to advance a career by pursuing the maxim "Hitch your wagon to a star." Nor is it beyond comprehension that some of those in pursuit come to me after having been burned in the glow of the star. If only I could have saved them the wasted expense!

Endgame for the commercial record industry

Domination of the record industry by the compact disc in the 1980's inaugurated a marketing boom. Before the CD era, a relatively small number of large record firms controlled virtually all commercial Classical repertoire releases.

When small labels issued recordings of works by living composers, funding normally came from outside sponsorship. Only the likes of Stravinsky, Barber, Copland, and a handful of others—the stars—could induce record executives of the major labels to risk the capital needed to fund the occasional recording against the hope of sufficient sale revenue.

Soon after the rise of the CD and the replacement of analog recording with digital technology, the ranks of small labels grew, and the number of Classical releases mushroomed. This growth coincided with the East-bloc boom and ushered into the public marketplace an unprecedented number of commercial recordings of varying quality and of previously unknown repertoire.

Until 2002, a number of small labels, among them Centaur and Albany, risked some of their own capital to underwrite recordings (mostly of new works) deemed likely to sell enough copies to generate a profit. As I

write this, in mid-2007, small labels in general no longer provide funding for projects. This situation creates a hidden risk to the individual artist.

Before 2002 some small labels risked their own capital to underwrite new music releases. Today the sponsor must fund the project.

A maxim for anyone about to fund his/her own commercial recording: When all funding is secured in advance (i.e., provided by the composer, soloist, or other sponsor), there is a natural tendency toward erosion of the label's concern for quality, and there is a corresponding erosion of the presumed advantage in release through known brands. The client must see to quality control, especially quality of performance and quality of engineering; the record label should not be counted on to do this.

The advent of online streaming may well revive the commercial recording market in ways which are currently unfolding. The present atmosphere of uncertainty appears destined, however, not to alter the basic conditions of the recording studio. In a world which in many ways seems adrift in a political, economic, and cultural whirlpool, we can only welcome this aspect of stability.

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