

Changes in marketing in the classical music business over the last 20 years

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It is a great pleasure to be able to speak here today. I am going to talk about how the classical music business has radically changed in the way it has operated over the last 20 years in the UK, with a particular emphasis on marketing.

I have used the time frame of 20 years in my title, but strictly speaking it is 22 years, because my starting point is the EMI recording of Vivaldi's popular work the *Four Seasons*. There were an extraordinary number of recordings of this famous piece in 1989 and even more so now. It is one of those pieces that most violinists want to lay down on LP, CD or digitally rather like conductors who want to record Beethoven's 9th symphony. It is a landmark in a musician's career. The challenge for the record company in this situation is how to market and promote another new recording of a work so well represented in the recording catalogue.

EMI, under the project leadership of Barry McCann, an executive in the Strategic Marketing Division interestingly and not the Classical Division, devised what was in the real definition of the word a unique campaign for the release of the disc in the Autumn of 1989. I will illustrate the basic principles of the marketing campaign a little later. But with time to reflect, it was visionary in that it took a pop marketing approach to a classical music recording and successfully reached a new buyer, a non-traditional one; an irony here because, as I alluded to earlier, musicians used this work as one in which they could illustrate their intellectuality through their musical interpretation (and therefore wanted it to be appreciated by the classical cognoscenti). In this case the *Four Seasons* is remembered mainly for its marketing impact.

If the success of the *Four Seasons* was fortuitous, then luck also played a part the following year. The expansion of a classical music audience afforded by the use of non-traditional classical music promotional tools was further enhanced in 1990, when the BBC chose the opera aria *Nessun dorma* from Puccini's opera *Turandot* as the theme tune for all its programmes of the FIFA World Cup Football competition that summer. This passionate piece of music, sung by the well-known and charismatic tenor Luciano Pavarotti, helped create a larger audience base for classical music. This was because the television programmes themselves were appealing to a cross section of society, that is those interested in football and not just classical music. The operatic theme was itself reinforced by a concert to mark the final of the football competition in which Pavarotti was joined by two other tenors, Plácido Domingo and José Carreras. Recorded by Decca, the sight of all three singing to millions the world over via television and radio did offer the view that classical music could be significantly successful on a commercial level, by being able to reach a wider market. And both the *Four Seasons* and the Three Tenors were highly successful on a commercial level. The *Four Seasons* achieved 2 million sales and an entry into the Guinness Book of Records as the best-selling classical music recording of all time at that point.¹ The recording of the 1990 Three Tenors concert and the successive recordings of similar concerts in 1994 and 1998 led to these albums becoming the all-time best-selling classical recordings.

Popularising classical music or using classical music in a mass consumer approach prior to the *Four Seasons* release, was not new in the recording world. One of the most successful series which popularised classical music

¹ <http://www.emiclassics.com/artistbiography.php?aid=55>

in the UK was a series first introduced in 1981 called 'Hooked on Classics'.² Their success followed on from the light pop group Electric Light Orchestra's fusion of arrangements of classical and pop melodies, personified, in particular, in the classic piece 'Roll over Beethoven'.³ The man behind 'Hooked on Classics', Louis Clark, was a former music arranger for the pop group Electric Light Orchestra. This also illustrates the influence of popular music on a classical music project through Clark's experience with ELO. Clark conducted the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra performing a collection of recognizable extracts from classical music works, played over a continuous beat (such as a fast disco beat or a slower rhythm) which linked the segments together. Using pieces of classical music for adverts or films also raised its profile. For example Ravel's *Bolero* was used in a seduction scene in the film *10* between Bo Derek and Dudley Moore in 1984,⁴ and by ice-skaters Torvill and Dean in the same year for the final of the 1984 Winter Olympics.⁵ And sections of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* have been used for aftershave and lager adverts as well as being sung at football matches.⁶ Because the reach of the audience is larger than that in a traditional classical music setting, the pieces achieve a mass cultural perspective in this context, through the use of television, ideal for marketing to a wide audience.

And these two projects are perfect examples of what Keith Diggie in his book *Arts Marketing* describes as 'The Available Audience and The Unavailable Audience'.⁷ The 'Available Audience' is defined as those who are likely to attend that organisation's concerts or buy recordings (through traditional media outlets for that genre of music coverage). The 'Unavailable Audience' is defined as those who are not traditional (arts/classical music) buyers but '*potential does lie within this group and there are ways of reaching it but they are not the ways that should be used for the Available Audience*'.⁸ These statements are useful in allowing us to examine the impact of the marketing campaigns of these two projects on the classical industry. They have had a long-lasting influence on the business. This is the dilemma for all product marketing: how do you attract more buyers in order to expand your consumer base but at the same time retaining your existing buyers? This was the issue that faced EMI after it had marketed Kennedy's recording of the *Four Seasons*.

Kennedy had a serious classical music following and a consequence of the publicity resulted in classical music reviewers commenting more on the promotion of the campaign itself rather than the musical interpretation itself. Jim McGuigan in his book *Cultural Populism* describes the term 'populist' as carrying negative connotations and cites Nigel Kennedy who has been labelled 'populist' and therefore has sold out his 'serious' cultural status for popular approval and commercial success.⁹ Because he doesn't look the part and speaks with an East London accent (unlike his own) Kennedy is appealing to a different audience, a 'pop' or 'populist' one, implying a mass consumer focus. In fact EMI was marketing Kennedy himself as the focus rather than the music and this is more associated with pop marketing techniques. It is worth commenting on Dominic Strinati (in his book *An introduction to popular culture*) when he states that '*mass culture is a culture which lacks intellectual challenge and stimulation, preferring undemanding ease and fantasy*'.¹⁰ This definition is not applicable to all classical music recordings that are focused on the strategic classical consumer. It implies a lack of artist integrity and skill, both of which are integral to the artist (and record company), and especially relevant when considering the artistry of Kennedy, Pavarotti, Carreras and Domingo. However the comment has relevance to the *Four Seasons* because the repertoire is undemanding and could reach a consumer who preferred music of that ilk.

² http://www.face-the-music.de/louis_e.html

³ <http://www.legacyrecordings.com/artists/electric-light-orchestra/bio>

⁴ <http://www.filmsite.org/ten.html>

⁵ http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/14/newsid_4156000/4156053.stm

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2009/jan/02/classical-music-film-carmina-burana>

⁷ Diggie K., *Arts Marketing*, Rhinegold Publishing, London 1994, p.32

⁸ *Ibid.* p.33

⁹ McGuigan J., *Cultural populism*, Routledge, London 1992, p.2

¹⁰ Strinati, D., *An introduction to popular culture*, Routledge, New York 1998, p.14

Traditionally classical recordings are judged by the artist's interpretation of a particular piece; for example, a recording of a Beethoven symphony would be chosen for the orchestra and conductor performing it. As Adorno states: '*in Beethoven and in good serious music in general...the detail virtually contains the whole and leads to the exposition of the whole... in popular music the relationship is fortuitous. The detail has no bearing on the whole, which appears as an extraneous framework*'¹¹. The marketing of the *Four Seasons* is very much against what Adorno would have wished for from a 'serious'/classical musician: the focus is not on the music itself as he and the classical music lover would expect in a classical piece, rather the popularity of the work and how much air-time it receives on radio, how many downloads and CD sales it achieves and how many interviews the artist makes giving the recording. A focus on the artist as I stated earlier which does happen in some classical repertoire. So you might prefer Claudio Abbado and the Vienna Philharmonic playing Beethoven rather than Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic!

My own experience has given me an insight into the way the classical music industry operated pre-1989 and post-1989. Through my first record company job as Press Officer for Decca Classics, and subsequently as Head of Press & Promotion for EMI (where I worked as part of the marketing team for the Kennedy recording), I witnessed the re-structuring of the classical music divisions of the major record companies into a two-tiered system of core classical and strategic classical. In essence this meant that those in the strategic classical area were charged with drawing up classical music campaigns which would reach a consumer not necessarily (and unlikely to be) interested in the interpretation of the music itself. Instead the spotlight was on either the artist him or herself or repertoire which could be easily listened to and did not require analysis.

The traditional job specification for a Classical Press Officer in a record company had been to send out a monthly order form to national and regional CD (and for a while cassette tape!) reviewers to classical reviewers of the national papers, specific classical music magazines and various producers on BBC Radio 3. Their order forms returned, the Press Office would then supply some or all of those requests. Advertising would follow a similar pattern with occasional appearances in national newspapers but usually restricted to classical music magazines, displays in record stores and concert halls and adverts in concert programmes. This was a generic job description for all record company marketing executives, whether in Europe, USA or the Far East.

So let us compare the promotion for EMI's *Four Seasons*:

The range of advertising for the recording was astonishing for a classical recording and included:

National and Television co-op TV advertising; adverts on a local London radio station; advertising in national newspapers and monthly pop/style magazines such as Q, 20.20, The Face, and Blitz. Finally EMI organised poster displays in record shops nationally and funded an out-door poster campaign around railway and London Underground sites. The pop marketing technique can be further seen in a single of one movement of the piece, called *Summer*, which was personally delivered to radio stations; this meant the single had air-play on BBC pop stations Radios 1 and 2. Even the Music Trade magazine *Music Week* received the front cover on 23rd September 1989. That really was an accolade. Pop artists fight to get the chance to be on the cover.

It is also important to understand that the major companies in the classical recording sector in 1989 (EMI, Polygram, Sony and Warner Brothers) contributed to a long-term impact on other areas of the classical music business, once the success of the *Four Seasons* and the Three Tenors had been assessed. Their influence extended to the use of innovative ways of trading and marketing outside the classical music field. One example is the Royal Opera House in London which, in 2008, launched live opera and ballet performances in cinemas around the UK and abroad. The range of venues included the Teatro Real, Madrid and King's College Chapel,

¹¹ Adorno, T., *The Culture Industry*, Routledge, London 1991, p. 303

Cambridge.¹² This followed a similar series from New York's Metropolitan Opera entitled *Live in High-Definition* initiated in 2006.¹³ These cases show opera reaching a broad audience by providing outside broadcasts, a mass marketing tool. And this is not new in Vienna with the Vienna State Opera doing a similar project last summer.

One example which shows the progression of classical music marketing is from major retailer HMV. The classical CD concerns the violinist Nicola Benedetti. This poster is taken from an HMV campaign with the aim of attracting consumers into their stores to buy Nicola Benedetti's recording entitled *My Inspiration*. The composer, Tchaikovsky, is a popular composer, appealing to both specialist and non-specialist music lovers. The marketing emphasises this joint focus with a quote from the violinist herself, placed prominently in the middle of the leaflet cover. An additional marketing tool is the inclusion of the album sleeve highlighting the label that released it, Classic FM radio's own range. With the station recognised as a successful broadcaster to a populist medium (seen in its listening figures of over five and a half million listeners),¹⁴ it is therefore a perfect media partner for HMV to run a joint marketing campaign with.

Technology has also been exploited by the classical music industry and there are a number of different models that show classical music organisations copying the pop music industry by embracing the advantages of trading over the internet. Online business has pervaded all areas of the classical music profession, from live performance to recording, and from music management to retail.

One example is again HMV. Having launched its website to sell product (hmv.com), the retailer announced in November 2008 that it would be making available on its website the ability to download tracks onto consumers' MP3 players. It began by undercutting Apple and introduced a subscription model offering over four million tracks for streaming.¹⁵ Interestingly, despite classical sales proving low at 5% with classical DVDs even lower at 1-2%,¹⁶ the important point worth making is that the retailer is making this facility available for specialist areas such as classical music.

Classical music can be described as high art but this definition doesn't remove a business ethic. In his article on *Entrepreneurship and Leadership in Marketing the Arts*, François Colbert states that: '*it is said that high art has a product focus and popular art a market focus.*' Colbert continues by naming a product-oriented enterprise as a chamber music ensemble or modern dance company, and a Hollywood film project by way of a market-oriented example.¹⁷ I would argue that the way the classical music business has adapted its marketing since 1989 have fused both, and that high art is overtly both market and product focused. For example, the *Four Seasons* was product-focused in that it was a new recording made by a reputable soloist and orchestra. The CD was also market-driven because the marketing campaign specifically aimed the product at a non traditional classical music audience. This was achieved through the release of a single in the preceding month of the complete album, delivered to non classical music media and promoted via a range of advertising and artist interviews not normally associated with a classical music recording.

The combination of product and market elements is seen in other projects following on from the *Four Seasons* release. One example is the 2002 Warner Classics recording entitled *Monastery of Sound* (which I project managed). The title centred on a well-known clubbing enterprise, *Ministry of Sound*. This involved a London

¹² http://www.londondance.com/news_details.asp?NewsID=7617

¹³ http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/broadcast/hd_events_current.aspx

¹⁴ <http://www.thisisglobal.com/radio/classic-fm/>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Email from Gennaro Castaldo, Head of Press, HMV, 28th September 2009, Appendix 2

¹⁷ Colbert, F. (2003), 'Entrepreneurship and Leadership in Marketing the Arts', *International Journal of Arts Management*, Volume 6, Number 1, Montreal, Autumn 2003, p.30, Appendix 4

dance club, recordings and tours devoted to this type of music. *Monastery of Sound* sought to emulate the clientele associated with the original concept. It was based on Gregorian chants with a view to consumers buying it for late night listening, similar to ambient music. The media targeted for advertising and editorial was again both national newspaper and non classical music magazines. This is evidently a marketing-focused product because of the range of consumer the recording could potentially attract; but it was also a product pivot because the music itself was high art (that is monks singing music to a high standard). The repertoire came from long deleted CDs of Gregorian chant so re-mastering the music was inexpensive.

In Julian Johnson's engaging book *Who Needs Classical Music?* the author discusses whether musical value is relevant when a piece of music has achieved commercial value. Johnson states: '*what does it mean, in this context, to question the musical value of a piece that has sold millions of copies and topped charts for weeks? Its commercial value speaks for itself and is confirmed by the symbolic awards of gold or platinum discs. But what does it mean to suggest that its musical value is not necessarily equivalent to its commercial value? We are approaching a situation where the question is simply meaningless.*'¹⁸ This is an interesting point. Do the mass marketing techniques in the classical music field imply that the musical content is not as relevant as the commercial aspect? For the traditional classical music consumer the interpretation of the piece is a paramount. For the artist, that is so as well but they also want as many sales as possible so any marketing or promotion that can achieve this is to be welcomed. We have come a long way from people complaining that the musicians performing on stage are not wearing appropriate concert dress (black tie for men or long black for ladies!).

Adorno's definition of the culture industry is espoused in his book *The Culture Industry*.¹⁹ Adorno comments on the culture industry as one of anti-enlightenment, describing it as '*progressive technical domination, [which] becomes mass deception...impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide for themselves.*'²⁰ A harsh perspective and one I don't agree with. First the statement implies that the classical music business is unable to adapt to new business models on its own. This is not the case. Far from impeding individuals, the growth in online trade in the classical music market as a whole has significantly enhanced the opportunities for individuals to listen to classical music and to decide for themselves, whether to explore the genre further. Second, Adorno's definition does not take into account the individual markets which the classical industry now focuses on: core classical and strategic (or 'mass') consumer. Both types make their choice depending on their musical tastes, and now have access to a variety of classical music products, as a result of the success of the unique the *Four Seasons* marketing campaign, and the phenomenon of the Three Tenors concert. Classical music has become populist through mass communication.

There have been some genuine innovative campaigns conducted by music organisations using the internet as part of their business cycle. Classical music has followed the exceptional example set by the pop band Radiohead. It is worth a brief overview of the project in order to compare its similarities with examples of classical musicians' attempts illustrated below. *In Rainbows* was the band's seventh album and the first to be released without the support of a major label. The group began its marketing campaign with the banner of 'pay what you want' to download the new album. This was followed by the opportunity to order a deluxe box in time for Christmas. A standard CD was released in other countries at the end of December 2007. The release achieved worldwide media interest. Research by MCPS-PRS Alliance (now PRS for Music) stated that there were 2.3 million downloads between 10th October and 3rd November, 2007.²¹ This is a very high figure, helped by the

¹⁸ Johnson, J. (2002), *Who Needs Classical Music?*, Oxford 2002, OUP, p.16

¹⁹ Adorno, T.W. (1991), *The Culture Industry*, London 1991

²⁰ Ibid. p.92

²¹ <http://www.prsformusic.com/creators/news/research/Documents/Economic%20Insight%2010.pdf>

worldwide media interest. The fact that the band was well established in the market added to the success rate. In fact 3 million purchases of *In Rainbows* were made from the band's website, disc boxes and the physical album release, a project that shows the breadth of sales tools now readily accessed by consumers.²² A significant number though is the physical sales figure. In a similar manner, another band, Coldplay, achieved 2 million downloads of its single Violet Hill, within one week of release. Taken from their new album Viva La Vida, the single was available for a free download for seven days on the band's website. The band subsequently pursued the policy of 'something for nothing' by giving three free concerts in June 2008.²³ The principle is similar, albeit on a smaller scale, to Radio 3's Beethoven download campaign in 2005 in which one of the broadcaster's established orchestras, the BBC Philharmonic, performed the complete cycle of the Beethoven symphonies which were made available for streaming and downloading (for free).

The violinist Tasmin Little represents a paradigm of the *In Rainbows* model for the classical music sector. The violinist released her first new recording after a four year gap in 2007. Entitled 'The Naked Violin', the recording was initially made available as a free download. The pieces were made available in an easy to access format on the artist's website, which, and this is good marketing, contains links to a range of music organisations and media outlets. The site also extended an invitation to burn the CD free of charge. Little comments that the figure for downloading was half a million and goes on to say: '*I hoped to encourage people into listening to classical music by making it accessible and by providing spoken introductions to the music...I know that many people who listened to The Naked Violin said that they would continue to explore the amazing world of classical music.*'²⁴ This is a prototype of how a professional classical musician has embraced technological developments in order to market herself more effectively, following pop procedure, and in so doing communicate with existing fans and attract new ones. The fact that Little released last year a second album *Partners in Time* using similar tactics is an indication of the success of this format.²⁵

If, as Sir John Tusa (former Managing Director of the Barbican Centre in London), states that '*audiences are increasingly fractured, disaggregated and self-aware*'²⁶ then acute awareness of the classical music consumer and how to market to them as they become more diverse and open to a wider competition is an essential part of the business. Ultimately classical music has developed into a product-orientated service. Selling concert tickets or a CD is just one facet of an organisation's *modus operandi*. The musical world has three participants: the listener, the musician and the music company (be it a record company, broadcaster, promoter, manager, publisher or venue) and the last 20 years have seen the classical music industry move in a similar fashion. Musicians and consumers have become more independent of the industry itself through advances in new technology, as well as the industry developing its business model through wider-focused marketing tools.

²² <http://www.examiner.com/x-498-Music-Examiner-y2008m10d16>

²³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/hi/music/newsid_7373000/7373466.stm

²⁴ Email from Tasmin Little, 9th March 2010 to author

²⁵ <http://www.tasminlittle.org.uk/>

²⁶ Tusa, J. (2007), *Engaged with the arts, writing from the front line*, London 2007, I.B.Touris & Co Ltd, p.199