

The new designer label

It is the worst time in history to release classical records – but an independent industry newcomer, Onyx, is about to prove that quality recordings can upset the downturn

BY NORMAN LEBRECHT

IF YOU were starting a business in 2005, which of these would seem the best bet: farming in Zimbabwe, making manual typewriters or setting up a classical-record label? Myself, I'd catch a flight to Harare, but I could be wrong since, amid the ruins of former classical glories, there are some pickings to be had, and a pair of likely lads with form as long as a Bruckner concerto are about to try their luck with a designer label.

The partners are wide-eyed survivors of classical wipeout. Chris Craker, a clarinetist in London orchestras, moved into record production; then, in 1998, with 400 recordings to his credit, he started a smart label, Black Box, with venture capital from two Tory Lords, Young and Chadlington. Black Box's unique selling point was living composers – not a rapid revenue source. After three tough years, Craker sold out to Iron Maiden-owned Sanctuary and took a pause for reflection.

That's when he met Paul Moseley, 14 years a marketing VP at Decca, where he spent most of his days in corporate meetings pondering the meaning of decline. Moseley had Russell Watson, Hayley Westenra and Bond on his books but he stuck his neck out on occasion for classical projects, earning the respect of artists. Now, like so many others, he was an independent consultant to a disappearing industry.

Together, the pair took a look at the landscape and saw nothing but wasted assets. The key to success in the record business is the name check. If the customer has heard of the artist on the cover, he is halfway towards buying the disc, or so the theory goes. Yet here were dozens of big names unable to get on record. Craker and Moseley decided that if the project was right, they would mortgage their houses to back quality classics.

That's the notion behind Onyx, a boutique label that launched last week with four discs by well-loved performers. The bubbling American soprano Barbara Bonney sings English songs, accompanied by Malcolm Martineau, Bryn Terfel's regular sidekick. The august Borodin Quartet, background players at Stalin's funeral, deliver a 60th-anniversary recital with co-founder Valentin Berlinsky still on cello. Both CDs feel as if they have a purpose.

The other two releases, though, are a class apart. Viktoria Mullova is a virtuoso violinist who has never quite



A class apart: the virtuoso violinist Viktoria Mullova plays no-holds-barred Vivaldi on one of Onyx's first four releases

Clive Barba

deserves. One of the last border-flitters from the old Soviet Union, she had a child with Claudio Abbado, and another with an orchestral player, before settling in Fulham with the eclectic cellist Matthew Barley. On Philips, she recorded most of the great concertos but never sold a bundle. Four years ago, she tried a crossover album with Barley. Then she took a year off playing to rethink where she was heading. Now she's back and going for gut.

On Onyx, the once-austere Mullova attacks Vivaldi, bow-hair flying, with the period-instrument Italian band Il Giardino Armonico. Forget academic authenticity. All Mullova did to meet the band was restring her precious Strad with mediaeval cat gut, instead of modern metal, tone it down a tad to baroque standard and borrow an antique-shop bow.

The resultant sound is so raw it verges on the bucolic, yet phrasing and articulation are immaculate and the confrontational atmosphere is nuclear. This is Vivaldi no holds barred.

Then there is the Pascal Rogé project. Rogé, 54, is so niche he vanishes between the cracks in floorboards. Styling himself *Ambassadeur de la musique française*, he plays nothing else, and like no other pianist alive or dead.

Rogé used to record for Decca until it declared him unmarketable. Now he is recording the complete works of Debussy for Onyx, starting with the *Préludes*, which he plays with a touch so distinctive and a playfulness so méchant that when he gets to the *God Save the Queen* parody in the Samuel Pickwick variation, I laughed out loud on three separate hearings. This is a record that sets new benchmarks in French music.

So, can the Onyx method work? By conventional wisdom, it doesn't have a snowball's hope in Minorea. The majors have a stranglehold on distribution, packing stores with hybrid trash, while the independent classical sector is in worse doldrums than usual with elite Hyperion facing a million-pound bill for a copyright case it unwisely contested to an unnecessary and probably inexorable conclusion; Hyperion will survive, but with deep cuts.

ANY new entrant to the market must find a corner amid a rabble of on-label vanity imprints from famous orchestras, composers and concert halls, before facing the apathy of a public that does not fully realise what it lost when mainstream classical recording rolled over and died.

Yet, for all these morbid auguries, things are looking up for Onyx. In the months that he and Moseley were nagging their bank managers, Craker was being headhunted for a different job. Sony Classical was about to merge with BMG and a new boss, Gilbert Hetherwick, wanted Craker to run the UK office. Regime change had overturned Sony Classical. There was to be no more

crossover — it had cost too much and earned too little. First casualty is the showy violinist Vanessa-Mae, who signed for Sony Classical moments before it collapsed and is now being consigned to one of the group's lesser pop labels, where she rightly belongs.

Sony-BMG is holding its first management meeting in Berlin this week. It aims to maintain a moderate classical output in which Craker will contribute ideas and local productions. But could he keep his own label? There was a pause in the process as corporate brains mulled this estoteric conundrum. In the end, Onyx got the best of both worlds.

It is now an independent label, run by Craker and Moseley from their dining-room tables, but it will also have major-label distribution and access to proper budgets. If a disc takes off on Onyx, there could be a follow-up on BMG-Sony but the project will have the attentiveness and integrity of a craft object.

This, it seems to me, is a pretty good deal. The corps get class artists without the headache of a long-term contract, while the creatives get a voice in A&R. It's an odd arrangement, but it could be a model for some good music-making on a modest scale.



Trans-Atlanticist: American soprano Barbara Bonney sings English songs for Onyx

40 Mozart: The Marriage of Figaro

Erich Kleiber
(Decca: Vienna, June 1955)

THIS WAS fantasy casting. Vienna, in the Fifties, had an unmatched Mozart ensemble, with Hilde Gueden (Countess), Lisa Della Casa (Susanna) and Alfred Poell (Count Almaviva) on staff at the state opera company. The virile young Italian Cesare Siepi sang the Figaro of his life and the conductor was the Vienna-born Erich Kleiber, who spent months going

THE 100 CLASSICAL CDs

back over original scores to refresh this repertoire staple.

Kleiber disliked making records and grumbled when the Vienna Philharmonic changed concertmasters from one session

to the next, but the spring in his overture was inspirational. Kleiber insisted on recording all of the recitative, some in comic accents, the first time an opera set had included spoken parts. The release, in November 1955, was timed for the reopening of the Vienna opera house, rebuilt from bomb rubble by public donation.

Kleiber returned to conduct Verdi's *Requiem* with the same orchestra and chorus but, due to Viennese intrigue, inferior soloists. To a perfectionist, this was a bitter blow.

On 27 January, 1956, the 200th anniversary of Mozart's birth, he was found dead in a bath in a Swiss hotel. **NL**

