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CLASSICAL SCORES: SEASONAL SALES

November 24, 2007

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Heading into the end of the year, few holiday-themed releases rank high on the classical and classical crossover charts. Of course, the No. 1 for Josh Groban's "Noel" (143/Reprise) on Top Classical Crossover in recent weeks probably has his team singing hallelujah, while "Let It Snow" by vocal ensemble Chanticleer has had a rather modest showing thus far.

On the Top Classical chart, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's house label has had a very strong showing with the group's latest release, "Spirit of the Season," featuring Norwegian songstress Sissel. However, the larger picture reveals that in 2007, as in the past few years, the classical labels have largely ceded the front-line holiday release market to blockbuster popera acts handled by pop labels (namely, Groban and Il Divo), even as they continue to release a modest number of their own holiday-themed front-line releases, as well as midline and budget compilations.

According to Nielsen SoundScan, nearly half the sales of holiday classical or classical crossover titles in 2006 were attributable to a single album, the Il Divo title issued a year earlier, "Christmas Collection" (nearly 440,000 of Il Divo versus some 820,000 total). In 2005, "Christmas Collection" accounted for more than half the total sales in this area (about 544,000 out of about 954,000 total).

Indeed, if you remove Il Divo from the equation, you see that sales of classical and classical crossover holiday titles dwindled precipitously in 2005 and 2006 (see chart, page 55). That trend is holding in 2007: 266,000 sales have come from Groban's "Noel" alone, out of just about 327,000 total classical and classical crossover holiday sales.

By contrast, as recently as six years ago, acts that originated and were nurtured at classical labels—namely, Charlotte Church and even the Three Tenors—were a significant force on the Seasonal chart. In 2001, for example, Church's "Dream a Dream" hit the No. 5 ranking in terms of all holiday music sales across all genres.

REICH AND ROLL: Everybody loves an underdog. That fact, plus a deep and abiding passion for Steve Reich's Music for 18 Musicians, is what might have originally driven hundreds of listeners to check out a 5 a.m. performance of the piece by a group that almost no one had ever heard of.

The setting: the annual Bang on a Can marathon, held at the World Financial Center's Winter Garden in lower Manhattan last June. The players: the Grand Valley State University New Music Ensemble from Allendale, Mich. The music: one of Reich's most popular and influential works.

If that was too early for you, the GVSU players recently released their recording of Music for 18 Musicians on the independent label Innova. The result is a hyper-propulsive and yet silkily beautiful, entrancing and utterly alive interpretation that more than holds its own.

The group—mostly comprising students and entirely of volunteers, led by composer/conductor Bill Ryan—spent nothing short of a year painstakingly working on this one mammoth piece. The results were, by all accounts of those who greeted dawn with these young musicians, simply exhilarating. It wasn't that they were simply able to negotiate a work that is famously excruciatingly difficult to play; instead, they fully and confidently claimed it as their own. And Reich's writing, by turns ebullient and meditative, proved the perfect match to greet the light of a new day.

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