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Philadelphia Orchestra enters the ear-bud age

The ensemble is offering downloads of live shows directly to consumers through MP3 players.

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The sleek, unmistakable Philadelphia Orchestra logo makes its debut on tiny iPod screens today as the orchestra attempts to expand its audience by transmitting itself in miniature.

Starting today, the orchestra will offer recordings of live performances unavailable anywhere else. Downloads, from www.thephiladelphiaorchestra.com,

will be a third of the cost of a typical compact disc.

Though the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, and any number of European orchestras have made performances available for download, the Philadelphia Orchestra believes it is the first major American ensemble to do so without a distributor, marketing directly to the public.

That is more than an academic distinction, at least as facilitated by Nugs.net, which has worked with rock bands such as Metallica and Phish to make concert performances directly available to fans.

"We've seen it become an important new model in the mainstream music industry," said Brad Serling, founder of Los Angeles-based Nugs.net. "It can be significant in the classical world."

While a typical classical recording must divide the gross among the record label, the distributor and the retailer, Nugs.net will take a considerably lower 30 percent and leave the rest for the orchestra to distribute as it wants, said Elizabeth Warshawer, chief operating officer of the orchestra.

Immediately available are 26 pieces, including eight Beethoven symphonies conducted by Christoph Eschenbach over the 2005-06 season, plus two of Wolfgang Sawallisch's most fondly remembered interpretations, Schubert's *Symphony No. 9* from 2005 and Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 5* from 2000.

Prices are \$4.99 for basic MP3 files; shorter works, such as Berlioz's *Roman Carnival Overture*, cost 99 cents.

More than a dozen new pieces will be added every year, orchestra officials said. Looking ahead, orchestra president James Undercofler is interested in purchasing the rights to the orchestra's earlier commercial recordings, some of which are now available on iTunes.

Sound quality has long been an issue with classical music and the newest electronics; MP3s haven't always been CDs' equal. But one innovation in Nugs.net's operation has been doubling the encoding rate of MP3 files for a significant sound upgrade, Serling said.

Also available are "FLAC" files, which are generally \$1 more and offer audiophile-quality sound. Later this fall, Serling said, the FLAC files will have sound superior to what's possible on compact disc. At present, even the most sonically humble files are superior to Webcasts.

It's a heady time for the orchestra. Less than 24 hours before today's rollout, the group received clearance to use a performance of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*, which it will sell for \$9.99 on MP3, \$11.99 on FLAC. Later repertoire additions will appear at irregular intervals.

The orchestra's financial investment is nearly impossible to pinpoint. Many elements, like recordings that are edited and ready for download, plus a Web site for selling them, already existed. "We had to shift work, more than dollars, to make it happen," said J. Edward Cambron, vice president of marketing and public relations. "We leveraged things we were already spending."

The income potential is a big question; many classical groups are resigned to recordings' being more an image builder than a significant source of revenue.

All of this might be wearying for some older consumers already suffering from technology fatigue. Yet, with the CD losing its hegemony in the market, classical consumers might not have a choice in changing habits to accommodate MP3 and FLAC files.

"We might be a little ahead of our own time," Warshawer said, "but we can be patient. This is an important thing to do. We don't need a quick return."

Downloading the Orchestra

Downloads of past Philadelphia Orchestra concerts are available at [www](http://www.thephiladelphiaorchestra.com).

thephiladelphiaorchestra.com.

For information, call 1-888-747-6847.

The cost is \$4.99 for most MP3 files, and 99 cents for shorter works. "FLAC" files, with audiophile-quality sound, will cost \$1 more.

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