

The Philadelphia Orchestra Downloads

This past September, the Philadelphia Orchestra became the first major American symphonic institution to sell its recordings as downloads. This comes at a time when, for economic reasons, releases of orchestral music by labels big and small are ever more infrequent. The Philadelphia Orchestra itself was without a label affiliation until Ondine began issuing some live performances on SACD in late 2005. In addition, the distribution of classical recordings is increasingly problematic with the disappearance of “deep inventory” retailers such as Tower Records. Now, we may see symphony orchestras taking both the record company *and* the record store out of the equation.

The Philadelphia Orchestra Online Music Store’s initial offering features 27 selections. Roughly half are from recent concerts, including performances of all nine Beethoven symphonies conducted by Christoph Eschenbach, the PO’s current music director. Also available are readings of Schubert’s Symphony No. 9, a Shostakovich Fifth led by Wolfgang Sawallisch, as well as several other performances from Philadelphia associate conductor Rossen Milanov. The remaining 13 selections are taken from the Orchestra’s celebrated Centennial Collection and present archival material led by Leopold Stokowski, Eugene Ormandy, Riccardo Muti, and Sawallisch. The repertoire ranges from Brahms (Variations on a Theme of Joseph Haydn) to Respighi (*The Pines of Rome*) to Penderecki (*Trenody for the Victims of Hiroshima*).

Audiophiles are typically skeptical of music downloads, expecting compressed music files and inferior sonics under critical—i.e., non-iPod—listening conditions. The Philadelphia project addresses this concern head-on, providing two options for the consumer. For \$0.99 to \$9.99, depending on the length of the program (a typical symphony

costs \$4.99), a user can download a 256 kbps MP3 file. This is twice the data-rate of an iTunes file and, while no one will confuse the format with the absolute sound, these MP3s are quite listenable, even on a high-end system. Significantly better, however, are the FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec) versions, available for a dollar more. In comparison to the MP3s, these sound like a good compact disc burned from your computer to CD-R.

To produce these downloads, the Philadelphians have turned to nugs.net enterprises, a company that has provided “band-to-fan” distribution for rock artists like Phish, Metallica, and the Dave Matthews Band. The Philadelphia Orchestra is its first classical client. Brad Serling, founder and CEO of nugs.net (and a long-time reader of TAS), grew up in Philadelphia and observes, “The Orchestra has a long history of being on the cutting edge and was the perfect orchestra to launch its own direct-to-fan download service.”

Of note, Serling has plans to offer 24-bit FLAC files in the future. “We believe there will be more demand in the classical market for high-resolution recordings than in the live rock market. Many of our clients do in fact send us 24-bit masters of their live recordings, which we then dither to 16 bits for download release. All of the festivals we work with, from Bonnaroo to Lollapalooza to Austin City Limits, for example, capture everything in 24 bits, so we are sitting on a high-resolution archive we can tap into in the future as 24-bit playback becomes more user-friendly.”

DVD-Audio/SACD-quality recordings for sale over the Internet? Sounds like it’s coming.

The current Philadelphia Orchestra downloads are available through the PO’s Web site: www.thephiladelphiaorchestra.com.

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