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CLASSICAL VIDEO: Dedicated Home Audience Finds Lasting Value in Music Never Out of Fashion

By DEVRA HALL

Following is a survey of home-video labels with classical product.

At Home Vision, a division of Public Media Inc., national sales manager Jeff McGuire says, "We insist on the finest quality tape, shell, and duplication. Even our packaging is distinctive... it's almost like a coffee table video." Their next priority is to reinforce their identity and value in the marketplace. "Positioning our product in key catalogs such as American Express and Critics Choice gives it a certain credibility or validation," explains McGuire. But what makes Home Vision a bit unusual in the traditional video world is their policy to not use wholesalers. "By its very nature, classical product tends to be slow turning. By selling direct to dealers I can offer them better margins to justify my space in their stores."

Historically, the top seller at Home Vision is "Aida" with Luciano Pavarotti. Surprisingly, next on their list is a children's op-

era based on the Maurice Sendak story "Where The Wild Things Are." Even more startling is the success of the March 1990 release of "La Boheme" starring Luciano Pavarotti with the San Francisco Opera. In just a few short months it has already become their third all-time best catalog seller. Also high on the list is the "Beethoven Piano Concertos" with Murray Perahia and the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, Sir Neville Marriner conducting, and a four-hour series called "Guitarra" featuring Julian Bream.

Recent releases generating excitement at Home Vision include the "Dance Theater Of Harlem," featuring performances of Agnes de Mille's "Fall River Legend" and Robert North's "Troy Game" as filmed abroad during their recent European tour (\$39.95, 117 minutes). Another recent dance title is the "Margot Fonteyn Story," a documentary about her life and ca-

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reer as a prima ballerina (\$39.95, 90 minutes). Meanwhile, enthusiasm is building in anticipation of the debut of their first opera titles from La Scala, where Home Vision now has an exclusive agreement. Debut releases are tentatively scheduled for fall.

A V.I.E.W. Video, president and founder Bob Karcy feels that accessibility is the key factor. "We were initially surprised to find a great response coming from rural areas where people are unable to get to live performances in New York or San Francisco. They simply feel deprived." Karcy believes that store owners should create "cultural departments" within their stores. "Companies need to offer more and more product so that outlets can stock enough to genuinely create a cultural department. After all, 43 titles doth not a classical department make."

Two of V.I.E.W.'s best-selling videos are holiday fare. "Christmas With Flica," starring Frederica von Stade, and a London concert "Kiri Te Kanawa At Christmas," are both slated to be available on laserdisk. Also perennial top performers are Mozart's "The Magic Flute" with Gert Bahner and the Gewandhaus Orchestra, and Rossini's "La Cenerentola" starring Fedora Barbieri.

Karcy has set up a major promotional effort in conjunction with the Bolshoi Ballet's U.S. tour this summer. All of V.I.E.W.'s Russian ballet videos, including their new "Bolshoi Soloists Classique," two Kirov Ballet programs, "Classic Ballet Night" and "Invitation To The Dance," and "A Gala Evening" with the Moiseyev, will be part of a special promotional offer creating a kind of video "dancenost." The one-hour "Bolshoi Soloists Classique" featuring Nina Timofeyeva and Mikhail Lavrosky will be on sale for \$29.95 during the July through September tour, and as of October will shift to its regular selling price of \$39.95.

Other recent releases from V.I.E.W. include "Great Arias With Placido Domingo And Guests" featuring Barbara Hendricks and Simon Estes (\$29.95); a black and white filmed version of a Pergolesi opera "La Serva Padrona," starring Anna Moffo (\$39.95, 80 minutes); and "La Scala," a documentary of classic performances from the archives by stars such as Tito Schipa, Mario Del Monaco, Tito Gobbi, and Tagliavini (\$29.95, 62 minutes).

Video Artists International has set July 4th as the tentative launch date for the "Voice Of Firestone" series. The first eight releases will feature singers Licia Albanese, Jussi Bjoerling, Bidú Sayão, Eleanor Steber, Renata Tebaldi, Leonard Warren, Rise Stevens and Lauritz Melchior. According to VAI sales manager Allan Altman, the release date was set to coincide with the holiday, "because these releases are going to be, in the opera world, quite a historic event." VAI licensed the archives from the New England Conservatory. The original black and white kinescopes broadcast from 1949 to 1963 will be "enhanced for optimum visual and sonic quality," and the price will range from \$19.95 to \$24.95 depending on the running time which will vary from 30 to 60 minutes.

With more than 60 performing arts videos in its catalog, VAI's two best-selling cassettes are Menotti's opera "Amahl And The Night Visitors" starring Teresa Stratas, "Der Rosenkavalier" starring Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, and "First Ladies Of the Opera" featuring Leontyne Price, Renata Tebaldi, Birgit Nilsson, and Joan Sutherland.

Kultur, billing itself as "the leading publisher of performing arts video cassettes," is celebrating its 10th anniversary. Their first-ever releases, still catalog top-sellers today, are video compilations of rare performance footage of pianist Artur Schnabel and violinist Jascha Heifetz. Other top-performing titles from their extensive inventory of timeless ballets, operas, classical music concerts and artist profiles include "Baryshnikov Dances Sinatra," Joseph Losey's film of Mozart's "Don Giovanni," and Franco Zeffirelli's film of Verdi's "Otello" starring Placido Domingo.

Recent releases include last month's "StrataSphere," a memorable film portrait of the great opera soprano Teresa Stratas (\$29.95, 87 minutes), the even more recent "The Kirov In London" featuring Natalia Makarova reunited with the Kirov after 17 years (\$39.95, 126 minutes), and a profile of choreographer Yuri Grigorovich, "Master Of The Bolshoi" (\$29.95, 67 minutes). Also slated for late summer release are two educationally oriented videos, "The Heifetz Master Classes" and "Pavarotti At Julliard," with a very special release of "Pavarotti In Concert In China" (\$29.95) for fall.

While marketing at Kultur is geared toward letting people know that all this product is available, pricing is also a key factor. According to national marketing manager Brad Carty, "We have a very strong sell-through and all of our pricing is such that our products are collectible. The only products that sell for more than \$39.95 are those that are multi-tape mini-series, and even those sell through."

PolyGram Classics & Jazz, having just launched their first classical video lines, agrees that pricing is a key element. "We're starting at \$24.95 which is a very big selling point for classics," says Deborah Morgan, VP marketing & sales. Beginning with a wide selection, their May and June titles include "Karajan In Salzburg" (DG), "Horowitz Plays Mozart" (DG), "Jessye Norman Sings Carmen" (Philips), Bernstein's "West Side Story" (DG), "Rubinstein In Concert" (London), and "Rigoletto" starring Pavarotti (London).

For Morgan, however, price is not the only consideration. "We are a visually oriented world, and people who are normally intimidated by the classics can really begin to enjoy them through video." Once the product is in demand, the next question becomes where to buy it. Both Altman and Carty agree that people who are interested in classical music are more likely to be found in record stores than in video stores. While Kultur does much of their business through direct marketing, Carty notes that their distribution agreement with PolyGram Classics allows customers to purchase their filmed operas and ballets in the same location where they buy their classical audio counterparts.