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EXPANDING CROSSOVER BOUNDARIES: Baiting the 'Classical' Trap to Capture Fresh Audiences

By DEVRA HALL

Most industry executives agree that the big change in the marketplace for classical recordings is not the existence of crossover, but the new variations on old themes.

Today, movies and television commercials are fueling the classical crossover craze as moviegoers and TV viewers try to identify "music from the opera that Cher saw in 'Moonstruck,'" or discover "the name of the opera that Michael Douglas and Glenn Close both liked in 'Fatal Attraction?'" How many people recognized those operas as Puccini's "La Boheme" and "Madama Butterfly?" How many appreciated the humor in using Figaro's aria from Rossini's "The Barber of Seville" as background music for a Braun Cordless Shaver commercial?

"We are trying to educate people who like some of this music. Many are not even aware that what they are hearing is really classical music," says Sony Classical, formerly CBS Masterworks, marketing VP Harold Fein. According to Fein, classical crossover is not so much a musical genre as a marketing concept. At Sony Classical the crossover product is largely theme oriented, with titles like "Love At The Movies," "Mozart At The Movies," "Fright Night" geared toward Halloween, and the series of Dinner Classics with recipes by Martha Stewart, promoted as "the guru of good taste for millions of baby boomers." "Amore," one of two releases for this month, is billed as "the creme de la creme of romantic Italian opera" as heard in the films "Moonstruck" and "A Room With A View," as well as on the Tott's Champagne commercials. The second release is "Sonnatas For Two Pianists" with Claude Bolling recording his original compositions with Emanuel Ax. The marketing

collaboration herald "a fun-loving performance of these highly accessible new compositions."

In a society that markets computers as "user friendly," it should be no surprise that record companies are marketing classical or classically oriented music as being "accessible." One of the leading crossover acts for Telarc is Erich Kunzel & the Cincinnati Pops. The promotion for their "Symphonic Spectacular" release heralded "some of the most thrilling and accessible orchestral works of the last 100 years." Telarc owner/chairman/CEO Jack Renner's definition of crossover is "a generally classically oriented artist or group playing things that are accessible (there's that word again) to a lot wider marketplace." Nevertheless, even Renner admits there are times he can not decide "when crossover is crossover and when it's just light classical." Just like the movies, sequels are beginning to occur in recording. Following the still-continuing success of "Round-Up," Telarc released a sequel last month with Roy Rogers singing the title track, "Happy Trails," and Gene Autry reciting his Cowboy Code. Next release scheduled for Erich Kunzel & the Cincinnati Pops will include a suite from Danny Elfman's "Batman" score, along with other scores from Hollywood's sci-fi movies.

No mention of Telarc's crossover success is complete without Don Dorsey. He raised eyebrows with his first Telarc release in 1986 in which he synthesized Bach, Dorsey's "Bachbusters" gave Telarc its first No. 1 hit, bumping the previous top-selling "Ama-deus" sound-

track and remaining in No. 1 position for 14 weeks. His second recording, "Beethoven Or Bust," hit the top of Billboard's crossover chart and held it for more than six months, making it the longest running No. 1 crossover album of the year. Telarc has scheduled a third synthesized classical album by Dorsey for release in 1990.

With crossover releases selling in six-figure quantities, many classical labels now believe they can not live by Beethoven alone. Nevertheless, it is easy to understand why some purists fight to clarify the line between entertainment and art. As a critic for the Berkshire Eagle wrote, "Bud Lite leads to Beethoven Lite."

Angel Records president Brown Meggs likens running a hard-core classical label such as Angel to being stuck on a merry-go-round. "I think we are all a little desperate. We have maybe a thousand good pieces, and we all keep remaking them with the latest artists," explains Meggs. One way to get off the merry-go-round and put a new slant on these pieces is to have nonclassical artists interpret them. This was done quite successfully at Angel with the release of "The French Collection—Jazz Impressions Of French Classics," containing works by Debussy, Satie, Ravel, Poulenc and Fauré, as interpreted by New York jazz musicians Eddie Daniels, Kevin Eubanks, Fred Hersch, James Newton, and Toots Thielemans. Yet another alternative, says Meggs, "is to persuade good serious artists to take a look at material that's not among the thousand good classical pieces." Meggs favors the serious, historically important shows like "Show Boat" and the upcoming releases of "Kiss Me Kate" and "Anything Goes."

Peter Elliott, senior director of A&R & marketing for RCA Victor, feels that "crossover recordings are really an at-

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tempt by classical artists to reach out and grab a new kind of audience. They are working on repertoire that expands the awareness of the public to their particular art or talent." Of course the wider the audience, the more receptive the media. More avenues for radio airplay and television exposure become available. In promoting the recent RCA Victor release "Inner Voices" by Richard Stoltzman with guest artist Judy Collins, Elliott says, "approaching 'Good Morning America' with Richard Stoltzman's latest Brahms sonata package is simply not as enticing. Offer them Richard featured with the beautiful Judy Collins singing a Joni Mitchell song, and it's more popular. It reaches out to a wider audience and it's exciting."

RCA Victor recently released "The Home Video Album," featuring selections from their "Classic Film Score Series." But the big news is that it is the first recording to be released in Dolby Surround. "It's the first ever in the industry, and we have an exclusive on the Dolby Surround process for audio recordings," says Elliott. The next volume, "Classic Film Scores For Bette Davis," is scheduled to be in-store by Dec. 1, with expectations of a dozen more releases over the next year.

New marketing and advertising campaigns are yet another means for reaching out to grab that new audience. To opera lovers, the name Jessye Norman may be a household word, but since when does an opera recording command a budget big enough to afford a billboard on Hollywood's Sunset Strip? Normally, the number of potential classical consumers is perceived as too small to merit such an expense. Nevertheless, in the wake of the international media exposure that Norman received for her rendition of the French national anthem at the Bicentennial celebration in Paris, Philips Classics seized an opportunity to use the billboard approach to promote her newest recording, and hopefully re-energize her emerging new audience. In addition to the three-CD set containing the complete opera "Carmen," Philips Classics is also marketing a one-CD version with

highlights from the opera that they believe will have a much wider appeal.

Who are those new potential listeners/consumers? Sony Classical's Fein once referred to them as those who were "burnt out on Led Zeppelin but not yet ready for Mahler." Robert Woods, Telarc's owner and president, calls them hi-fi hobbyists. According to Telarc surveys, their consumers are "85%-87% male, between the ages of 25-44, with college educations and white-collar jobs, who have grown up on rock'n'roll and are coming to classical through crossover."

London Records VP Lynn Hoffman-Engel says, "We are trying to tap into the baby-boomer audience who might really be ready for classical music and we're trying to present it to them in a friendly way." Their Nu-View line is "an answer to those who may have heard a lot of new age music, but are a little tired of it and maybe want something a little more sophisticated." Some of the pop marketing techniques are being used to reach this audience. Music videos are normally not done for classical artists. Nevertheless, Ute Lemper's classical crossover video of "The Alabama Song" from her "Kurt Weill" album proved worthwhile with its airing on VH-1. London has also begun experimenting with VNRs (video news releases), which combine music tracks and interviews by the artist. "We sent VNRs around nationally to every cable station in the U.S. and we succeeded in getting excellent airings."

Upcoming at London is a holiday release, "A Nu-View Christmas With Tom Stacy." Stacy, principal English horn player for the New York Philharmonic, collaborates with Chuck Mangione sideman Rob Mathes, who also did the musical arrangements.

Many look to jazz as a viable crossover genre. With a respectable audience, both in numbers and attitude, it is a perfect match with classical. At PolyGram, jazz and classical are marketed through one division. "We really feel that they live side-by-side and in many cases have the same audience, an audience for which good sound is of prime importance and is often synonymous with classics and jazz," explains Hoffman-Engel. Both London and Philips are aggressive about radio, offering promotions in conjunction with live performances in certain key markets. This has been espe-

cially effective in supporting the Boston Pops releases, which consistently sell in large numbers.

Jazz and new age play a significant part in the classical crossover product from Philips. Nancy Zannini, VP of Philips Classics U.S., says that they would have released "The Blue Chip Orchestra" with or without the new-age moniker, but admits "the fact that it happens to fit in to stores' new-age departments is probably making it more successful than if it were just marketed in the classical department." Zamfir's recordings used to be called "easy listening," but his pan flute and organ music is now fashionably compatible with today's new-age market.

In discussing "The Uptown String Quartet," Zannini points out that, as a brand new group, classical and jazz consumers are not yet familiar with them by name. "In this case you're just dealing with good music. And both the jazz and classical buyers respond to in an equally favorable way." This also appears to be true of the transitions from straight Bach to the subtly syncopated jazz rhythms on "Bach Swings With John Lewis." This Philips release went out "with strong recommendations to our sales people that when they sell it they sell it to the jazz department as well as the classical department."

Definitions of classical crossover vary from: (a) recordings sold in both the classical and jazz or new-age departments of the record stores; (b) classical artists performing popular material; (c) popular artists performing classical material; (d) classical music orchestrated for or performed by electronic "instruments"; (e) classical music performed by classical artists but packaged thematically and marketed to the aging baby boomer; (f) music that hard-core classical mavens listen to when they want to relax; (g) music designed to appeal to those who have not yet experienced "real" classical music; to (h) all of the above.

While industry executives may not all agree on a single definition, they do agree that crossover is a great way to sell records to a thirtysomething audience whose taste alternates between Springsteen and Scarlotti.