

Shopping for Classical Music Online

The primary focus of this article concerns finding online sources for purchase of so-called physical media—CDs, SACDs, Blu-Ray Audio discs—and not so much about digital downloads. For those readers interested in digital files and computer audio, I've included that as a separate discussion at the end.

The 'online' part of this essay's title is really an unnecessary add-on because when was the last time you've been in an actual store that sold classical CDs? Today everything is done online, so no need for the qualifier. The last time I was at Barnes and Nobles they only had 26 so-called classical selections which were mostly cheap compilations, crossover titles, and one CD by Bang Bang. I remember the days when I ran the classical section of a large record store and we had sixty titles in the bin just for Beethoven's Ninth. But I'm not complaining since, in many ways, shopping is now easier both in terms of ordering from the comfort of your home at any time of the day or night, but also in being able sample recordings and find exactly what appeals to your own tastes. I've explored several online subscription streaming services, and I continue to buy CDs (and SACDs and DVDs) from a variety of sources which I'll discuss here.

The first question many ask when they see my wall-to-wall room with 6,000 CDs and separate storage room with 3,000 LPs is when am I going to get rid of all this museum stuff and go digital? Well, the answer is probably never. Despite some audio industry prognosticators who have declared the CD a thing of the past (just as they did with LPs, which I still use) there is simply no equivalent, universal and ubiquitous format for digital files to be a truly plug n' play system like CDs. I get into all the nitty-gritty of that discussion at the end. For now, let's focus on how to buy CDs, and how to use online subscription streaming services as the ultimate pre-purchase audition process.

I highly recommend finding an online subscription service that allows you to access and stream complete recordings. Consider these services as the equivalent of Netflix for classical music lovers. As I've said, I've explored several but have been happiest with **ClassicalArchives.com**. They have their library fairly well organized and have probably the overall best choice of recordings (though none of them have everything). For about \$8 a month I have unlimited access to their library. Yes, there are a few quirks in browsing that annoy, but the other sites were even more annoying. My quibble with Classical Archives is that every time I back page from "View Album" to the menu I have to reset my viewing preference from the default setting of track numbers (who cares about that?) to the Artist's name, and sometimes I get thrown back to the main menu. But the other sites have issues that were even more irksome. All told, I wouldn't be without this service. It allows me to listen to recordings that are not in my own collection, and it functions as an audition process by which I can then buy CDs of recordings that really appeal to me. They also offer discounts on downloads for those who so desire.

Right now, let's talk about how to get good old-fashioned CDs. I have experimented with many online sources, and aside from a few cracked CD cases from poor packing, I don't have any real horror stories to relate. However, a few suppliers stand out as favorites and my go-to sources simply because they are easier to browse through, and follow-up with careful packaging and prompt delivery.

My overall favorite source is **PrestoClassical.co.uk**. Because the UK has a favored nation status as a trade partner, there are no duties or tariffs levied on CD orders. Prices given on the site are listed in US dollars if that is where you are located. The first time I ordered my credit card company put a temporary stop on the transaction until I called them to verify that this out-of-country transaction was legitimate; once Presto was on my authorized list I had no problems with subsequent orders. I have ordered from them numerous times and they pack more thoroughly than any other company (sturdy boxes with lots of bubble wrap). First and foremost, the site is organized better than any of the others, they post various critical reviews for each item, and they offer generous one-minute samples on featured items. The featured items are usually whatever labels happens to be on sale that month, at which point you will be able to sample just about everything from those labels. If you wait for a sale, prices on import CDs such Hyperion or BIS are less expensive than from any other domestic source. They also have a great sale on opera sets every summer (up to 40% off). Many European releases show up on this site 3-6 months before they are available in the U.S. The down side is that you shouldn't order from them if you are in a hurry to get something; orders often take 6-7 weeks to clear customs and get delivered. Presto also sells music books and music scores. For my purposes this a one-stop shop! If you are ever in the U.K. to visit the Shakespeare House, Presto has an actual brick-and-mortar shop that is nearby.

Among North American suppliers, I have, like everybody else, used Amazon, and I have been able to find some out-of-print items, sometimes new, sometimes used. I've had good luck with orders filled by Amazon itself, however some of the sub-contracted suppliers have taken a long time to deliver, or packaged with minimal care so that CDs arrive with cracked cases or with the prongs holding the CDs all busted out. I've never complained because I have plenty of spare CD cases about, but I do make a note of suppliers that don't seem to care and I don't give them any more of my business. My wife is a dedicated Amazon user, buying books by the handful every month, and I understand the value of their prime program which gives free shipping, and also allows us to watch choice movie and television programs for free on Amazon prime. In any case, the browsing format will be familiar to most everybody, but compared to the dedicated classical music sites, I find the Amazon format nowhere near as helpful. You can't browse new releases or future releases, or get industry news, and I can't go through pages of *Hammerklavier* Sonatas like I can on Presto, if that's what I'm after. The "recently browsed" or "customers who bought this also bought this" features on Amazon are really of no practical use to me. I'd rather have quick access to all other recordings by performer or of the individual work. Just compare their format with Presto and you'll see what I mean.

I also used the Classical Music Superstore (Alibris.com) a couple of times to get some hard-to-find items, and their Nashville supplier was prompt and came well-packed, but, as with Amazon, some of the suppliers shipped directly from Denmark or Germany in poorly packed paper sleeves that had my CDs arriving with shattered cases.

Another indispensable source is **ArkivMusic.com** which is a subsidiary of Steinway & Sons. They have a unique service agreement with Polygram, Warner, and others which allows them to manufacture discs on demand, items that have otherwise been out-of-print and unavailable from any other source. Once a year they have a sale on these exclusive archive issues. In terms of browsing they are not so great, and they are rather stingy with sound samples of items (which never start at the beginning of a track but always at some random point in the middle!). Nevertheless, this is definitely a site to put on your favorites tab bar! I have used them many times and have always been very satisfied with the service.

One other site worth mentioning is **hbdirect.com**. They often have good sales and specials on closeout items, and orders over a certain amount include postage and handling which actually makes the end price one of the most competitive in the market. I don't like their browsing system at all, with too many drawdown tabs and such to get to the desired work I'm after. Once you get to where you want to be, say "Bach piano," the pictures and text are well laid-out and browsing can be fun, if not as focused as with Presto. Sound samples fade in and out and give you about 26 seconds to listen to. Their home page is all about the top 25 best sellers (I certainly don't give a wit about that) and a poorly-set, jumbled presentation of upcoming releases. I'd seriously recommend they re-design the home page. Like I said, Presto is hard to beat in terms of layout and ease of browsing. But HB Direct (Formerly Haverstick & Ballyk classical mail-order) is a company I've dealt with for over two decades, and they're good people. I haven't had any defective CDs since the early 90's with the whole batch of 'corrosive' pressings from Unicorn/Olympia, but I got a defective CD in a recent order from HB that wouldn't play in any of my machines. When I called their customer service line they admitted such problems were extremely rare these days and rather than have me bother with a return shipment they had the importer send me a replacement unit right away. Within a few days I had my replacement at no cost or bother to me. Now, that's customer service!

Everybody has their own way of navigating around on the internet, so opinions may vary, but now you know who my suppliers are, and I can personally vouch for the good service I've received from Presto, Arkiv, and HB Direct. Each site offers digital downloads, usually for a couple dollars less than the physical CD. Whether you prefer digital downloads or physical CDs, do actually buy something and help support the arts. Happy listening!

Digital Files and Computer Audio

At present, the level of software technology is quite high, but at least for the foreseeable future, the hardware required to make digital files truly ubiquitous is simply not in place. I don't see a wholesale conversion any time soon (as in the next five years) as the younger consumer generation which drives this segment of the industry doesn't seem interested. My own teenage son is typical in this regard: he is perfectly happy with ear buds and iTunes played back over his iPhone.

When I talk about making digital files ubiquitous this is what I mean: we have on the one hand digital playback systems and the so-called computer audio industry providing high quality product, with high-resolution digital files, small, compact portable DACs such as the Dragonfly, or Meridian Explorer, terabyte memory sticks now available for a couple hundred bucks... but none of these has come together—software and hardware—such that music can be played in a simple plug n' play format like the CD or even the lowly cassette. Some of the latest cars models offer USB connection to the onboard audio system, and at least one high-end luxury car has a built-in iPod dock, but it will be many more years before these features are as universal as the CD player we find in just about every car now.

But even with a USB connector or iPod dock, there are still problems which make playback of digital files more cumbersome than simply sliding in a CD. Let's say you have an iPhone with some iTunes on file, if you want something better sounding than the native format low-resolution, compressed and dynamically restricted files, then you'll require an external DAC upsampler. Some of these are very compact now, but it's another few hundred bucks to add to the equation, and another link in the chain of connection devices. A & K also makes an audiophile quality portable audio system about the size of a cellphone, which holds up to 32 GB of high-resolution files and is capable of accepting an additional 64 GB of memory with microSD memory cards. A quality product, no doubt, but costing \$1,300.

What is needed is for the industry to provide adequate DAC conversion in a built-in system so that all this external gadgetry is not required. Something as easy as the cassette or CD in the past. No external DACs, jitter plugs, or fumbling through file folders. Just plug n' play. In other words, what we need is a hundred dollar memory stick that holds up to 10 hours of high-resolution files, stick it in the USB port of the car's onboard audio system (with built-in hi-rez DAC) and enjoy quality music for that long road trip. Just plug it in, set the volume, and enjoy the music. The same sort of infrastructure is needed so that wherever we go we can plug in our little USB stick and hear quality music... on the boat, on the boombox, on our laptops for those long trans-Atlantic flights, or directly into your primary playback system without the umbilical connection of a computer. Right now the process is too cumbersome and too expensive, and I haven't even got to the real problem with computer audio which we will now explore.

Right now digital and computer audio systems remain the purview of dedicated computer techies with lots of money and lots of spare time to download those hi-rez files. With high-resolution 192kHz/24-bit files, DSD 128, and DSD256, the matter of quality is not an issue here. I've heard some state-of-the-art digital systems demonstrated at a high-end audio dealer that were truly impressive. In particular I remember comparing Linn's SACD (Super Audio Compact Disc) version of Lazaridis playing some Liszt Etudes versus Linn's Direct Digital Master File, all via Linn's top-of-the-line \$25,000 Isobarik system. The sound of the Digital Master File version was a noticeable improvement over the SACD (possibly because the jittery effects of a spinning disc and reader are eliminated), and in terms of startling dynamic realism and uncanny see-through transparency was one of the best recordings I've ever heard. So, the technology certainly exists for high quality digital storage. But at present, and for the foreseeable future, there are just too many impracticalities for me to embrace this direction of audio playback.

I was surprised to read in The Absolute Sound's recent Computer Audio issue that they consider the CD a medium that is dead and without a future. Well, they said the same about the LP back in the day and I still prefer a good LP to mediocre digital downloads. As for the good digital stuff like I heard at that demonstration, plan on at least a \$10,000 budget. Here's a list of what you will need:

- Dedicated music-only computer with special upgraded software installed (the average soundcard is woefully inadequate). Minimum \$800 to thousands.
- Place to put the computer near your system so you can connect the two, or else have external memory devices which can plug into a component DAC (Digital-to-Analog converter).
- Plenty of external memory storage because even a simple two-channel file of a single sonata can take up to 3 Giga-bytes of memory, and something massive like the Mahler Second in 5.1 format can take up to 9 GB of memory.
- Secure back up for the hard drive (two prominent critics lost all their digital download files)
- Be prepared to fork out \$25 for simple files, and up to \$75 for something like the Mahler Second (and this when good CDs can be purchased for \$8!)
- Have an external DAC or new generation Discplayer/DAC (such as my Marantz 8004). Some crazy folks are paying up to \$80,000 for state-of-the-art DACs.
- Be prepared to spend lots and lots of time downloading from HDTracks, or other specialty online servers. Most downloads are by track, though sometimes one can download an entire album in one shot. In any case, assuming a typical a 12mbs DSL connection, something like the Mahler Second can take up to 80 minutes to download. My connection is nominally at 25mbs, but this still takes a good deal of time to download.
- Be prepared to spend lots of time creating files and organizing your digital collection.

- Be prepared to spend time searching the label's website for the so-called 'metadata' or liner notes, cover art, or details of production (all of which is readily found on a CD).

In short, and to put my own take on the process, this is all a titanic pain in the ass. Now, maybe for the listener who has only a hundred favorite albums, digital filing might be an option. For somebody like me with thousands of CDs and LPs (and growing every month) the file management alone and creation of files would be just too cumbersome. I also have a problem with things that exist in a sort of indeterminate digital limbo. I like holding a physical product, be it a book, magazine, CD or LP where I can see the cover art, read the liner notes, and see right away (without being an online detective) who the recording engineer was, what venue was used for the recording, or even who tuned and regulated the piano. Getting that kind of data online requires going to the label's website and navigating around wasting time.

At present, quality digital files are too expensive and require too much hardware and specialized software to be a grab n' go plug n' play source. Hardly a game-changer compared to the 'lowly' and maligned CD. Yes, something like the Sonos whole-home system can be fun for the person who listens only casually and without discernment for resolution. But to play head-to-head with a CD or SACD in terms of quality, it would take a minimum of about \$10,000 to assemble a file-based computer audio system that has the same level of refinement as a \$1500 CD player.

Of course, many casual listeners praise the convenience of having hundreds of songs handy on their iPhones. But I'm comparing the potential of digital/computer audio with the level of quality found on CDs and SACDs and now Blu-Ray Audio discs. As I said, the younger generation seems happy enough with the quality of MP3. My son has a huge MP3 file and is perfectly satisfied. Only when I sat him down to compare a classical orchestral piece in both a compressed MP3 download and with a CD version of the same recording did he begin to appreciate the differences in what I was hearing. Even so, the differences weren't all that important to him, because with the kind of dub-step music he listens to the only really important thing is how loud the subwoofer will play without distortion. In that regard he is a connoisseur, disdainfully dismissing 'mediocre' \$4,000 subwoofers we recently auditioned together.

I won't mention names here but some of the streaming services also employ dynamic compression (as do most of the online sound samples). If you are listening to Bach's Brandenburg Concerti while you do a workout, you are not likely to notice anything amiss. But when carefully listening to romantic-era music you will hear the adverse effects. One of the worst examples I've ever heard was at the end of the Liszt Sonata as performed by Bolet (I have the Decca CD, so I know the recording thoroughly), with the dynamic compression, tones that drop below a certain dynamic level actually seem to regenerate. In the last couple of lines in the sonata there are some long-sustained notes both in the low bass and in the upper treble. I heard the low C, which is played once, seem to regenerate three times as the music was processed through

the compression algorithm! This compression of data, both dynamically and in terms of harmonic resolution, often makes it difficult for me to tell the difference between a Bechstein and a Steinway. Some listeners may not care, but to me that is absolutely untenable. If an artist decides to play a Bechstein (like Bolet) or Bösendorfer, or whatever, I want to hear the unique tonal characteristics of their instrument.

Right now there is a kind of craze for the convenience of carrying around all your favorite music in your pocket. It reminds me of when the Sony Walkmans were first introduced in the early 80's and people would jog along listening to their favorite music. I never bought into that because have you ever tried to jog or do an aerobic workout to the Liszt Sonata? Maybe with Baroque music, but in general, classical music does not stick to a steady beat for long. Also, when I'm taking a walk in the woods down by the creek, I am there for the experience of being in nature, to hear the birds and the gurgling of the water. I'm already surrounded by Muzak wherever I go, so when I listen I really want to listen!

The other craze right now which is keeping the cash-registers ringing at all the audio stores is for room-to-room systems such as the networking Sonos system. Yes, I heard the demo, and the quality wasn't too bad, but I just can't imagine being that desperate to hear the Bruckner Seventh in the shower, or in the garage or kitchen while I'm bring groceries in. I also imagine that anybody who reads my comparative surveys is interested in how to increase the depth of their musical experience, not dilute it by spreading it around to fill an aural void. I do occasionally listen to music as background music when I'm sorting papers, but very rarely listen to music in the car, or any place public where I might have to respond to what's happening around me. If I'm deeply immersed in Mahler's Rückert Lieder it comes like a shock of cold water if the airline stewardess jostles me and asks if I want a pack of peanuts. I guess this could all be fodder for another separate essay, but as performing pianist I know the energy and concentration and striving for transcendence that drives artistic inspiration, so it's a source of consternation for me to reconcile musical edification against this pervasive need for music as a constant intravenous drip of entertainment.

To summarize the topic at hand, I maintain that CDs and physical media are still more convenient than file-based computer audio, and for the most part, the current level of CD playback is really quite superb (and just barely shy of the fantastic resolution I heard from the Linn Digital Master File playback). Many CD players or Universal disc players now offer front panel USB connection in case you have an external device and want to take advantage of the high quality built-in DAC. I highly recommend the Marantz SA8004 (list \$999) which is what I use in my primary system. The Sony SCD-XA5400ES (list \$1499) is another fine unit. With good speakers and amps, either of these disc players will take you to very near the highest level of potential in digital playback. Pursuing the computer audio option you'd have to spend thousands more just to arrive at the same level of quality, and be prepared for all the inconveniences involved. Not for me.