

Label Focus - harmonia mundi



Early history

Described by the New York Times as “one of Europe’s finest independent record companies”, harmonia mundi’s origins date back half a century when, in 1958, a



Bernard Coutaz

French journalist with connections to the book trade, Bernard Coutaz, decided to found his own publishing house for music. A year later the label

had released its first recording, *Chants From The Slavonic Liturgy*.

To begin with, the harmonia mundi catalogue - steered by a lack of finance and a natural direction provided by the help of well-known organ buff Dr Pierre Rochas - was based mostly on recordings of historic organs. Works were written especially with a particular model in mind, reviving interest in sound and in timbre at a time when many in the record business still thought essentially in terms of melody. In time the collection grew and began finding appreciative audiences in France, The Netherlands, Spain, Portugal and Italy.

The Deller years

In the late sixties, Coutaz met the countertenor Alfred Deller, who agreed to record for his label. Deller remained strongly associated with the company until his death in 1979 and, thanks to him, the catalogue became enriched with repertoire from the Elizabethan and Baroque periods, music which is still being explored even now.

From the 1970s onwards, harmonia mundi began to produce recordings of Renaissance and Baroque music, at a time

when the exploration of these genres was still largely confined to specialists. René Jacobs, William Christie and



Rene Jacobs and Alfred Deller

recordings became key in establishing harmonia mundi as a force in music from these periods.

Philippe Herreweghe (above) came to be known almost as ‘house artists’ for the label, and their

harmonia mundi - Best Sellers

Year To Date 2008

	Artist	Title
1	Paul Lewis	Beethoven/Piano Sonatas - Vol 4
2	Stile Antico	Byrd/Tallis/Heavenly Harmonies
3	Manze/Podger/Aam	Js Bach/Solo & Double Violin
4	Scholl/Concerto Di Viole/Behr	Crystal Tears
5	Padmore/English Concert/Manze	Handel/As Steals The Morn
6	Manze/Egarr	Handel/Complete Violin Sonatas
7	Paul Lewis	Beethoven/Sonatas - Vol 3
8	Theatre Of Voices/Hillier	Stockhausen/Stimmung
9	Academy Of Ancient Music/Egarr	Handel/Organ Concertos
10	Jean-Guihen Queyras	Bach/Cello Suites

All Time

	Artist	Title
1	Manze/Podger/Aam	Js Bach/Solo & Double Violin Concertos
2	Scholl/Ensemble 415/Banchini	Vivaldi/Stabat Mater
3	Andreas Scholl	Handel/Ombra Mai Fu
4	Aam/Manze	Handel/Conerti Grossi Op 6
5	Rozario/Aam/Goodwin	Tavener/Eternity's Sunrise
6	Scholl/Vocal Col Or/Herreweghe	Js Bach/Cantatas Pour Alto
7	Academy Of Ancient Music/Manze	Vivaldi/Concert For The Prince Of Poland
8	Scholl/Martin	English Folksongs
9	Anonymous 4	The Lily And The Lamb
10	Andreas Scholl	The Voice

Expanding into distribution

By the middle of the decade, the label had progressed from operating almost as a small record club to organising its own distribution in France, after which it began to handle records by other French and foreign labels. Today the company distributes about 50 foreign label catalogues.

Key classical labels distributed in the UK

- Alia Vox
- Alpha
- Delphian
- Glossa
- LSO Live
- Medici Arts
- Ondine
- Orfeo
- RCO Live
- Signum

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Encouraged by the success of this distribution venture in France, the company opened new centres in London in 1981, in Los Angeles and Heidelberg in 1982, Barcelona in 1986 and in the Benelux in 1988. First and foremost they acted purely as distributors, but more recently have contributed regionally to the catalogue.

The move into retail

The mid-eighties saw the company move to Arles (southern France) and subsequent years saw diversification into book distribution as well as the taking of a majority share in the music publisher and record label Le Chant Du Monde.

It was around this time that harmonia mundi began to create its own chain of record shops. There are currently 44 shops in France and three in Spain exclusively selling recordings on harmonia mundi and the labels distributed in these two countries. This proved a prescient decision: in France at present the sales from these boutiques represent 36% of their turnover.

The present day and beyond

Harmonia mundi now employs over 300 people worldwide and has a turnover of 63 million euros, releasing records from the whole range of repertoires, from early music to the compositions of the twenty-first century.

Today, the harmonia mundi group, under the artistic direction of Eva Coutaz, releases more than 60 new recordings every year, with best sellers from 2008 including:

- all four volumes of *Beethoven Piano Sonatas* from Paul Lewis, winner of Record of the Year at the Classic FM Gramophone Awards 2008



- *As Steals The Morn*, a collection of solo arias and scenes for tenor composed by Handel. This acclaimed title was performed by Mark Padmore and The English Concert and



was Vocal category winner at the BBC Music Magazine Awards 2008.

The year ahead will see a great deal of activity centred around the bicentenary of Haydn's death, including nine reissues, five significant new releases, a CD book and a DVD documentary focussing on the new recordings.

The rest of the label's release schedule looks impressive too, with new titles such as:

- *Idomeneo* directed by René Jacobs (to be released June 2009)



- *Recital at Ravinia* from the late Lorraine Hunt Lieberson and Peter Sirkin (to be released March 2009)

- *Brahms String Quartet op 51 no.1* by Arcanto-Quartett with Silke Avenhaus (to be released April 2009)



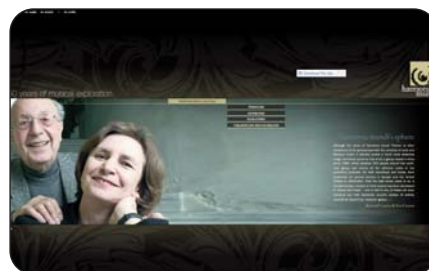
- *Bach Cantatas for Alto BWV35, 169 & 170* by Bernarda Fink (to be released February 2009)

Online activity

Around 450 titles are currently available in digital form through over 100 legal download platforms around the world including iTunes and eMusic. The United Kingdom leads the digital sales field in Europe, followed by France, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. The UK also tops the European list of sales through internet retailers, with approximately one third of turnover generated through Amazon, MDT, HMV.com, Presto, the Classical Music Shop, Bath Compact Discs and Crochet.

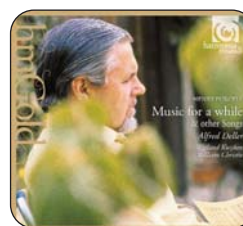
Harmonia mundi's website was completely updated in 2005 and offers links to other minisites detailing current activities (a recent example centred on new Handel box sets (link here) as well as keeping site visitors updated about artists on tour, label

news and enabling sign up for a regular newsletter (to date there are around 10,250 subscribers worldwide).



50 years of harmonia mundi

The label has been busy recently celebrating its 50th anniversary with a number of special editions (such as a luxurious box set covering highlights from the catalogue) and the launch of the **hmgold** range, which repackages classic titles at mid-price. A minisite has also been set up with the specific purpose of publicising the anniversary (link here).



Harmonia mundi UK also has increasing visibility in the World music field with its own labels World Village and Chant Du Monde, and distributes 25 World and Jazz labels, including ACT, CamJazz, High Note and HatArt.

After half a century, the label still operates by two abiding principles held firm since its formation: to be financially independent by reinvesting all profits every year; and to record repertoire they are passionate about, with musicians who share this conviction. In the words of founder Coutaz, "to be fired with enthusiasm for a work, a composer or a performer, and to wish to share your enthusiasm with others: that is the essence of our trade, whether you're publishing records or books".

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