

# Classical

## Fewer But Better Classical Albums On Way

By ALAN PENCHANSKY

CHICAGO—1980 will bring a slowdown in the volume of classical record releases in the U.S. However, improved standards of technical and artistic quality are seen as offsetting factors.

U.S. classical label executives expect to stir increased consumer interest in 1980 with the sonic advantages of digital recording technology and a promised new standard of excellence in U.S. pressings. The classical listener's increased sophistication and the use of improved playback equipment are factors being responded to, label heads say.

About a 15% overall cutback in U.S. classical releases is anticipated, with U.S. production work also declining as a result of the cost crunch. Companies with cutbacks in issuing include RCA, CBS, Angel, Nonesuch, Quintessence and possibly others. The cutbacks are part of general industry streamlining for tougher times.

The cuts are expected to fall hardest on developing artists. Label heads say young singers, instrumentalists and conductors will have a harder time breaking into recording ranks in 1980.

According to Irwin Katz, RCA Red Seal marketing director, the focus is shifting to stellar acts, big scale digital recording projects (a Mahler's Tenth Symphony with James Levine will be done digitally in Philadelphia this winter), and stringent measures to guard against pressing quality loss. RCA classical production work is being slowed, and each disk will receive maximum exploitation today, Katz says.

"Our effort is to put out only the very strong and viable product," explains Katz. "We see greater opportunity for us in marketing to really promote and develop the product we do have."

Katz believes current market conditions ultimately will force the labels into a stronger, more realistic business posture. "The most impor-

tant thing is quality," he notes. "We can't afford to experiment with quality anymore."

Adds Katz: "The leisure time business is generally in big trouble. It's in big trouble for one basic reason, the dollars aren't there."

CBS Masterworks, in a reorganization under Simon Schmidt, is applying brakes to its production activity reportedly. A release slow-down also is anticipated in line with the current market conditions.

The shift to higher quality is being carried out at CBS with a mid-winter digital product line launch. The company has new digital systems, says conductor Leonard Bernstein, Claudio Maazel and Zubin Mehta, as well as chamber music, solo recital and opera awaiting release in digital.

Pressing quality is a critical issue, and CBS has announced the development of a new "audiophile" product grade to be debuted with the digital line unveiling.

"The amount of disposable dollars is shrinking along with everybody's buying power," a Masterworks executive comments. "It's a tougher market out there."

Angel Records is promising to be at the forefront with new technical advances, says Raoul Montano, head of the EMI/Capitol classical division. Angel's leadership role in technical innovation will be displayed as part of a reexamination of the basic repertoire in new digital editions, Montano explains.

According to Montano, release numbers are being shaved by no more than 10%. Montano says the cutback will "not be too noticeable."

Says Montano, "We'll limit some of the releases just to the strong titles."

The new critical emphasis on disk pressing quality also is felt at Angel. Labels agree that the ultra-transparency of digital recordings will result in microscopic scrutiny of disk surface quietness today.

Angel's abandonment of compatible quad mastering and its shift to an independent pressing operation has resulted in significant improvement, claims Montano.

Repeated examination of the warhorses of the repertoire is the tradition in classical label releases. This trend is expected to be intensified

### Market Theatre Cassettes-Books

LOS ANGELES—Bonneville Productions, the long-time Salt Lake City conglomerate in broadcasting and custom tape duplication, is marketing the first of a series of 12 \$5.99 list Color Book Theatre packages for moppets.

The cassette, crayons and coloring book, encased in a heavy duty transparent plastic self-merchandising holder, is being sold direct to mass merchandisers by Gene Block & Associates, local marketing firm, through 19 satellite offices cross-country.

The series of fairy tale titles is narrated by Sterling Holloway and features a full cast of actors and original music.

Color Theatre Books, when purchased by the gross, come with a 66-inch-high metal wire fixture. Block states, which takes two feet of floor space. At the January CES, 12 additional titles to be available in January 1981 will be announced.

with the push into digital recording. For the next several years heavy doses of Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Bach, Beethoven, Stravinsky, Mahler and Prokofiev are being prepared, with special prominence accorded to the big, richly scored orchestral compositions.

"With digital recording you go with the warhorses to display the potential of the medium," Seymour Solomon of Vanguard Records explains. Vanguard has completed several productions using Sony PCM-1600 digital equipment. Titles being reinterpreted include Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" Symphony and Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade."

Montano says Angel looks forward to reinvestigation of the basic repertoire. "Very few times in the record business do we have a chance

to rerecord all the old catalog. We're going into this new digital system and it's going to help out business," the executive explains.

Today's classical customer is better educated than listeners of previous generations and the listening is being done on highly sophisticated playback equipment. Discussion with classical label executives turns up increasing reference to these factors.

Says RCA's Katz: "I think the audience is growing and becoming more selective in its choices. The younger public that is listening to classical music has a better understanding of it."

Angel Records will be responding to shifts in consumer taste as well. "You can no longer hype a classical record," says Montano. "If it's bad people won't buy it."

Montano says performances by lesser known orchestras and conductors won't show up today as readily as in the past. "Today's consumer is a little more quality conscious and he can differentiate more," the West Coast executive explains.

Artist signing standards are becoming tougher, with broad human appeal and the accessibility to media and public weighted heavily in the consideration.

"The companies are going to be looking for the artists that have that special kind of projection," a Masterworks executive comments. "The kind of artists that come across the footlights and jump across markets."

Says Katz: "I don't believe record companies can afford because of the crunch right now to go with young artists unless there is something exceptional about them."

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### Schirmer Music Relocates Store

NEW YORK—Along with a bronze bust of Beethoven, Schirmer Music has relocated here to the newly enlarged and renovated Brentano's at 586 Fifth Ave., between 47th and 48th streets.

When Gustav Schirmer established the store in 1861, one of his first acts was to place the bust of Beethoven over the entrance to the store at 701 Broadway. With each relocation, the bust took its traditional place over the doorway of the store.

This time around, it can now be found over the stairway leading to the new Schirmer Music department at Brentano's, part of the New York scene since 1853. Both Schirmer's, which sells sheet music, recordings and instruments, and Brentano's, the book chain, are Macmillan, Inc. companies.

Schirmer's move from 4 E. 49th St.—at the site since 1960—is being celebrated by a week-long round of musical festivities, including an 83rd birthday salute to composer Virgil Thomson. Throughout the week, there'll be appearances by such artists as Licia Albanese, Andre Kostelanetz, Bobby Short, Larry Adler, among others, and various workshops.

Interestingly, Schirmer's was Brentano's neighbor at the Broadway location in 1861.