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Against the Grain

"Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians"

ATG Interviews Roger Press

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ATG: I was in the exhibits at ALA only briefly, but was thrilled to hear classical music coming out of one of the booths and walked over there. How wonderful! Tell us about *Classical.com*.

RP: *Classical.com* is a service for libraries that enables their patrons to listen to classical music at library computers, or at home, while accessing a vast database of supporting reference material. It was born out of a very simple concept.

The online world now enables new ways of enjoying music — primarily through streaming, where a user can click and listen to music, often described as “audio on demand.” It also enables the user to “own” a digital version of a recording in the form of a download that they can listen to offline. It would therefore be possible to develop a cultural asset by having recordings of the whole range of classical music available for listening or downloading, together with reference materials about the music (like liner notes and biographies of the composers).

Libraries then become the best way of making music available to a huge public, because they already purchase music for their patrons. Libraries have bought electronic reference materials for their patrons for many years. The *Classical.com* service fits right in with that model — users of the Library can listen to any work they wish, either at a terminal in the library building (using headphones), or remotely from home (using headphones or speakers) with their library card as authentication.

Classical.com works on the same basis as a text-based reference product. The user can read it online (library license) or purchase a printout for a fee, in just the same way our company offers a listening service for the user via a library license. Then, if the user wishes to own the recording, they can buy it as a download or as a custom CD containing the tracks of their choice — just as they might buy a printout or photocopy of a journal article.



ATG: What's your philosophy? I just love your snippets of history and life of the composers that you give on your Website plus the current events information regarding classical music.

RP: Music is always more interesting when you understand a bit about it. This has always been the case — even **Beatles** fans wanted to know about them, and anecdotes about their life in Liverpool made the listening experience more intense. The same goes for **Mozart** and **Beethoven** — although you may like the sound of a concerto when you first hear it, if you learn more about it, the music has a greater resonance. Therefore, we write about the music in the tone of a “knowledgeable friend,” enabling users to increase their enjoyment of the music they listen to. Program notes, biographies and anecdotes are available, as well as images of the composers and photos of their handwritten manuscripts.

ATG: Tell us about Roger Press. What motivated you to do this?

RP: My background was as a concert pianist in the distant past, and then I went on to work at music companies like **EMI** and **PolyGram** (in order to make a more predictable living!). This was an opportunity to see how the large music organizations work — how they select artists, and promote recordings. Then when the so-called “Internet age” dawned in the late 1990s I thought it would be a great opportunity to open up new channels in the music industry, and began thinking about ways of delivering a music service — something comprehensive for a whole genre of music. Classical music was a good starting point because it is relatively easy to clear the rights and license performances of the entire major repertoire. So by putting together the right team we have managed to attract investment and build this music service, which is growing in leaps and bounds.

ATG: Do you have partners? Is the business proving to be viable?

RP: I founded the business with **Tim Lloyd** with whom I worked at **Price Waterhouse**. He has extensive experience in business planning in a major telecoms company developing their consumer model for TV and Internet programming. We added some great production and technical people to the team, and then attracted investors including **Bela Hatvany**, the founder of **Silver Platter** and **Ron Rietdyk**, who started up the U.S. office, so we have a secure financial base. The business has received a tremendous reception at both the **ALA** and **MLA** conventions, and the signs are that it is the right time to launch a listening service for libraries.

ATG: When I first saw your booth, I thought you were selling classical “muzak.” This isn't the case, right? What exactly are you selling?

RP: The music is accessed by the individual library patron via computers in the library, or a home PC, using headphones or speakers. We are selling a music service that

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works at various levels, depending on the user. For those who do not know too much about classical music but wish to get involved, we have preset playlists, like “Music for Relaxation” or introductions to the greatest works of the composers. Users can then read about the music and composers, and go on to enjoy further related music in an enjoyable way. Users with some knowledge of classical music can browse the various genres, e.g., “Orchestral music of the Romantic period.” Expert users can search and find the specific piece of music they want to hear — then listen with a click. So we present the music in a way that appeals to users of school, public and academic libraries.

ATG: *What kinds of libraries are buying your product? Is it largely academic libraries? Are you marketing your product internationally?*

RP: We expected public libraries to be the main market, but have been pleasantly surprised by the interest from academic libraries as well. The school market is also interested, because teachers can easily assemble playlists and prepare their teaching materials. So the market is developing well in these areas, and interest is building in the “rest of the world” outside the U.S.A., including Scandinavia, Europe and SE Asia.

ATG: *How do you go about deciding what recordings to make available? Tell us about the permissions process. How is it different in other venues?*

RP: We select recordings of works in the MLA list of recommendations for small, medium and large libraries. Increasingly the independent labels are keen to license recordings for our music service, because it is a new channel to an important market. The major record companies are also in discussion with us, and we expect to announce exciting license deals, including some of great artists, in the near future. The process of clearing the music is very complex, but it is an area of expertise we have developed, and enables us to access some of the world’s greatest recordings.

ATG: *Given all the changes in the music industry and the loss of revenues because of the “napstering” of music, what is your prognostication for the future?*

RP: The only good thing about the “napstering” of music is that tens of millions of people were taught that the Internet can deliver music in a compelling way, and became “literate” in this way of listening to and obtaining music. We are a totally legal, fully licensed music service, with a comprehensive and growing range of classical recordings. We believe in the approach started at EMI — that it is important to make music easier to pay for than to steal! We believe that our music service for libraries is compelling, and will encourage the fully licensed enjoyment of the music.

ATG: *Also, you can include a company profile if you would like — something about Classical.com — when started, number of people who work there, location(s), anything else you want to add.*

RP: **Classical.com** is currently a dozen people. Having been founded in **London**, we opened a U.S. office in **New York** last year, and our marketing and sales are run out of the U.S. office, which will increasingly become the public face of the company. We work with a range of distributors in different territories to supplement our own sales effort. In addition, our main focus is to ensure that the “product” is right for the library market, which is our total focus. You will be seeing some exciting ways in which the database is improved in the coming months — both in the amount of repertoire available, and in the layout of the service. ☛

people profiles encouraged

Roger Press

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Name: Roger Press

Born & lived: UK and US.

Early life: Passionate about piano.

Family: Wife **Tamara**, Fellow at **Clare College**, Cambridge (English Literature — Ph.D. on Henry James) and two wonderful sons.

Education: **Oxford** plus **University of Life**.

First job: Bus boy at **Mortimer’s Restaurant**, New York.

Professional career and activities: Ensuring classical music is accessible and enjoyable.

In my spare time I like to: Rollerblade in Hyde Park with my children and play the piano.

Favorite book: *The Golden Bowl*.

Pet peeves/what makes me mad: When London is not cold enough for snow to stay on the ground!

Philosophy: Art (paintings, music, dance, theater, literature) enables people to function.

Most meaningful career achievement: Starting up **Classical.com**.

Goal I hope to achieve five years from now: **Classical.com** in every library.

How/Where do I see the industry in five years: In five years the music industry expects to sell a significant proportion of its recordings in digital formats, which customers will access using computing devices. One could say that the next format (after Vinyl, Tape and CDs) is the digital format. People can listen to music online or with various devices (PCs, mobile phones, PDAs, MP3 players etc.). The **Classical.com** service enables libraries to be part of this future of digital music by offering a compelling collection of classical music recordings and reference materials to their communities. Remote access to the **Classical.com** database through the Library will enable library patrons to access the service “without walls” ensuring that libraries remain an important part of their communities, reaching into peoples’ lives. ☛