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Where are the record stores of yesteryear?

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Generations of classical music lovers received much of their musical education from specialized classical and operatic record stores, many of which have disappeared over the last few years. At least some of them were not just places of commerce, but academies that allowed collectors to congregate, examine the records on sale, and form a relationship with a recording in a way that is not possible without being able to handle a physical object in an actual location.

The Internet has brought countless benefits to the collector of opera and other classical recordings. But no one who has spent time in a first-class record store can see the Internet as anything but a complement, rather than a substitute, for the opportunities that the best stores offered.

Of course, we never imagined that they could disappear (or at least I didn't). For me, these stores were as much a part of the landscape as some famous library or museum, and somehow I assumed that they would always be around. As naïve as this belief was, it shows the central place they held in my music life. And I am sure that my own musical world, and music in general, is poorer without them.

This article will recall a personal selection of stores that I came to know particularly well, in order that they not be forgotten, and to show how they helped form the musical tastes of entire generations.

The stores will be divided into two categories, namely large chain stores, and smaller independent ones (the latter are covered in part 2 of this article, which will appear in the next issue). Each type served its own purpose: the large chain stores usually did not provide such personalized advice as the smaller stores did, but had a larger selection and offered the chance to browse in peace, whereas the smaller stores were sometimes more specialized and offered more individualized service. As I have never collected 78s, this selection will be limited to stores that sold operatic and vocal LPs and CDs; the time period in which I visited them ranged from the 1970s until the early 2000s.

Large chain stores

Rose Records, Wabash Avenue, Chicago USA

How fortunate that in the record-buying years of my youth I was able to visit regularly this temple of classical recordings. Reputedly at one point it stocked every classical record on the market, and by the 1970s it had a massive stock spread over two floors, offering every recording the opera and classical collector could possibly want. I remember the huge poster of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf with a signed dedication to the store that greeted visitors upon entering (does it still exist?).

The ground floor stocked the complete catalogues of all the commercial companies, and the area in the back of the store had a large selection of so-called “unofficial” or “pirate” LPs with live performances (i.e., labels such as EJS, UORC, HRE, etc.). I recall innocently asking a clerk if there was a catalogue of these unofficial LPs that I could order from, and receiving in return a look of amazement, together with a whispered admonition not to discuss them too loudly (some stores were worried about being sued for carrying records like these that may have violated copyright). I still treasure the LP set I found there of the live *Ariadne auf Naxos* from Vienna in 1944 conducted by Böhm (IGI-378); have the words “Ein Schönes war!” at the beginning of Ariadne’s first great monologue ever been sung more hauntingly, and with more beautiful tone, than they were then by Maria Reining?

On the right-hand part of the store upon entering was an escalator to the first floor (the second floor in US terminology), which contained a vast array of so-called classical “cut-outs”. These were LPs that had a hole punched in a corner of the cover, or had a corner of the cover cut off, without the condition of the record being affected (usually), and were sold at greatly reduced prices.

I spent many hours browsing through the stock of records on these two floors, emerging with a carefully-selected group of purchases that was invariably more than I could afford. I am sure that the opportunity Rose Records afforded me to browse through so many LPs, read the liner notes on the back, and weigh them against each other in deciding which ones to purchase, was in itself a valuable educational experience. And I am equally sure that the tactile sensation of holding them in my hands and examining the cover art (in those days Deutsche Grammophon and Philips in particular had some beautiful LP covers) helped impress on me the significance of recordings as cultural artifacts in a way that browsing on the Internet could never have done.

Among the records I bought at Rose was a 10-record set with excerpts of live performances by Maria Callas (*Gli dei della musica* DMC 01-DMC 10), which includes a wonderful set of booklets with reproductions of the

singer on stage and related news clippings, and which introduced me to her greatness. Another one is an LP on the HRE label (LR 103) with the best recording I have ever heard of “Tu che le vanità” from *Don Carlo*, sung by Margaret Price.

The owners of Rose Records sold it to the Tower Records chain in 1995, under whose auspices it continued in operation for several years. It then began to deteriorate as Tower’s fortunes lagged, and finally closed in 2006 when the Tower chain filed for bankruptcy (see below). The demise of Rose Records represented the loss of one of the great repositories of classical recordings, where music lovers and record collectors developed a love for music, and for beauty.

Tower Records, Greenwich Village, New York USA

If Rose was the great record store of my youth, Tower filled that role in my maturity. It was of course an international chain, with stores across the US and in other countries, and I had the occasion to visit several of them. For example, the classical Tower store in San Francisco was wonderful for a time, with handwritten cards by staff members next to the recordings commenting on ones they particularly loved or hated (I remember in particular a lengthy diatribe criticizing the famous live Wiener Philharmoniker/Bruno Walter recording of Mahler’s Ninth Symphony). There was a smaller Tower store in Phoenix, Arizona near a university that boasted an excellent selection of hard-to-find opera recordings, and it was there that I snapped up the live Covent Garden *Tristan und Isolde* with Flagstad and Melchior, conducted by Fritz Reiner (Recital Records RR-471). Years later I was to visit the superb Tower store in Tokyo, thought I understand that it is no longer affiliated with the US chain.

But the focus of my relationship with Tower was their Greenwich Village store on lower Broadway in New York City (Tower also had a large store near Lincoln Center, which I visited less frequently). One entered it to a blare of music (usually rock), but then took the escalator upstairs to the classical department, which was blessedly isolated from the rest of the store (including in acoustic terms). The selection of recordings was immense, and there were huge individual sections for historic recordings, vocal recitals, and opera. At the back of the classical department was a large glass cabinet, kept locked, which displayed rare treasures (such as certain CD sets imported from Japan).

Tower also had an entire store devoted to reduced-price cut-outs, with a separate entrance in the same building (later it moved to another building across the street). Here I picked up the “complete Battistini” on seven Seraphim LPs (IG-6153). One could spend endless hours browsing in

both stores, which I certainly did; the danger was increased by the fact that they were open until midnight 365 days of the year.

In many ways, Tower was difficult to love: the personnel were frequently unhelpful, the atmosphere warehouse-like, and the experience rather impersonal. But the anonymity of the shopping experience allowed one to submerge oneself in untold thousands of recordings without being disturbed, and the certainty that it was (nearly) always open gave one faith that the music contained in them would always be there as well.

Tower ultimately went bankrupt, and closed its doors forever in 2006. Over the years it had put many smaller independent stores out of business, so that its bankruptcy had a particularly devastating effect on the availability of classical recordings in New York. The disappearance of this unlovable but reassuring behemoth of a record store thus shook my assumption that classical music would always be available and be valued, and demonstrated to me that we can never take either of these facts for granted.

Independents

Dischi Orlandini, Via Fieschi, Genova, Italy

This store was probably unknown to most record collectors outside of Italy. Yet it had a selection of vocal LPs that I doubt was ever equalled, and its demise was a sad story.

I discovered it by accident in the centre of Genova. Upon entering the ground floor one already knew that it was something special, for although small, it was crammed to the ceiling with almost every label of classical LP and CD imaginable. It was here that I obtained some rare vocal CDs that have given me lasting pleasure. One among many is a live aria recital by that most elegant and pleasing of post-war French lyric tenors, Alain Vanzo, which includes one of the few versions of “Ah! Lève-toi, soleil!” with a diminuendo on the final high note (Le Chante du Monde LDC 278.833). Another is an opera and song recital by one of the most beautiful Italian lyric tenor voices ever, Salvatore Fisichella (Felmain Records FM 001).

But the true riches were located upstairs on the shop’s mezzanine. This was not always accessible, and the stairway leading to it was sometimes closed off with a rope (for what reason I could never discern), but it contained the finest selection of rare operatic and vocal LPs that I ever expect to see. It was shown to me the first time by an elderly lady referred to only as “la signora”, whom I took to be the manager of the store; later on I learned the role she played in Orlandini’s tragic demise.

The mezzanine contained shelves with thousands of rare vocal LPs, including labels that I have scarcely ever seen in any other store. I cherish a copy of a catalogue of the store's LP holdings given to me on my first visit, which in itself is a valuable reference tool as it lists the contents, and in most cases the catalogue numbers, of dozens of "pirate" labels such as BJR, Discocorp, EJS, Estro Armonico, HRE, Melodram, and OASI (from what I could tell, Orlandini seems to have had nearly complete runs of these labels). The store's leading position for collectors (at least in Italy) was confirmed by the large advertisements it regularly placed in the leading Italian music periodical *Musica*, with listings of hundreds of rare LPs and CDs.

Every time I visited the store, my exaltation at being among so many rare vocal LPs was mixed with feelings of frustration at knowing that there simply weren't enough hours in the day for me to browse through them all. The prices were also quite high, but in the end I always emerged with several treasures that I could scarcely have found anywhere else.

Among the jewels that I made my own were the first part of Act I of *Fidelio* (through the "Abscheulicher!") live from the pre-war Salzburg Festival, with Lotte Lehmann and conducted by Toscanini (UORC 218); and several LPs of live excerpts recorded in the 1930s from the Wiener Staatsoper on the Teletheater label. The impact of such live performances, however imperfect the sound was, on a young record collector who had not know before that they even existed, was profound.

Having visited Orlandini regularly throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, I had come to see it as a kind of cultural monument. The shock that I received when, in the early 2000s, I found that it had been closed, was profound. It was only several years later that I learned, via an article in a Genoese newspaper, what had become of it: the shop, which had (as the article stated) been around since 1958, had gone bankrupt in April 1998. Most shocking of all was the fact that it went out of business because of fraudulent bookkeeping by "la signora", who received a prison sentence of three years from an Italian court (at the age of 81!). As if to pour salt in my wounds, the newspaper account described how the bankruptcy trustee had held a closing sale in which all manner of rare LPs were sold for a pittance.

Though a chain of stores called "Orlandini" selling rock records still exists in Genova, this ends the saga of an operatic and classical record store which was (as the Italian newspaper story put it) "a small temple of sound". But those who had the pleasure of worshipping in this particular temple will never forget it.

Musicmasters, West 43rd Street, New York City

This was a Manhattan store with a fabulous collection of vocal LPs. I only entered it a few times, since it had a rather formal, forbidding appearance, including large leather chairs and oriental rugs that gave one the feeling of intruding in someone's living room. But the collection of local records was wonderful, and the store had been one of the favorite haunts of New York vocal record collectors since its founding in 1956.

I first visited it around the time it closed in 1990, and came away with some rare live operatic LPs, such as UORC 347, containing live Wagner excerpts from Vienna from 1933 conducted by Clemens Krauss. I remember that this LP was at the top of a shelf of records that reached to the ceiling and that I could only reach by climbing a tall ladder. I would have bought more, but the LPs at the top were covered with such a thick layer of dust that one could hardly breathe while looking through them (in fact, an article in the New York Times quotes the owner of the shop as stating that certain rare LPs had been kept "on the shop's highest shelves or in storage, and had not been browsed through for the last 20 years"). The same article quotes playwright Albert Innaurato as referring to stores like Musicmasters as "wonderful resources you could go in and hang out and meet some interesting people, and find recordings that you didn't know existed. I miss those places". So do I...

G&A Rare Records, West 72nd Street, New York City

This smallish store was located on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and remained in business only a few years, but boasted a huge collection of mainly vocal records. It had at the entrance the strangest sign I ever saw in a record store: "no casual browsing!" it proclaimed (one might as well imagine a church with the sign "no praying!"). But the selection was vast, and once one had entered and slipped among the maze of large shelves, it was relatively easy to engage in the prohibited passion of browsing.

I recall that once the store had a sale, at which all records were on sale *except* those that were marked with a special sticker (a strange system, and the reverse of that usually used in record stores). I managed to find a few LP treasures that did not have this sticker, including the live *Werther* from Mexico City with Simionato and di Stefano (Cetra Opera Live LO 30-3), and a live *Manon* from Barcelona with the dream duo of Caballé and Vanzo (MRF 203). One of the owners, who was at the checkout that day, indicated that he had made a mistake by not marking these two items, but let me have them at the sale price anyway, and even complimented me on a "good find". In any event, G&A was a fine shop and unfortunately disappeared from the scene far too soon.

Bremen House, East 86th Street, New York City

Bremen House was a store that did not sell music exclusively, but had an excellent section of classical LPs. This shop on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, located in an area called Yorkville that was known for being the centre of New York City's German immigrant population, was dedicated to imported goods from Germany of all types, spread out on two floors. The ground floor had a delicatessen, while on the first floor (actually a kind of mezzanine) was a large selection of classical LPs, including many rare vocal records. The service was either gruff or non-existent, but I spent many hours there.

The selection of live opera sets was particularly strong, and among those I picked up was a live *Eugene Onegin* in German from the Wiener Staatsoper in 1960 (Melodram 46), with Sena Jurinac an impulsive Tatyana, Anton Dermota plangent as the doomed Lensky, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau properly punctilious as the bored dandy Onegin. Unfortunately Bremen House succumbed to economic pressures and closed, but it was a valued store that reached beyond the New York record scene because of a thriving mail order business.

Soft 3, Akihabara district, Tokyo, Japan

The classical record collector who has not experienced stores in Tokyo has not truly lived, and for me this fact was exemplified by the store Soft 3. As an article in the Los Angeles Times from 2005 put it, "the mood in Soft 3 is one of quiet reverence, as though CDs are not so much objects of desire as historic cultural documents deserving deep respect". Finding it among the maze of stores near Shinjuku station was not easy, but I was rewarded with four floors packed with classical CDs. The fact that many had labels written solely in Japanese made it impossible to determine their contents, but also made it quicker to go through them.

But the greatest riches were available on the top floor, which contained an amazing array of live performances on CD-R. I spent hours browsing there (luckily the labels of most of the live CDs were written in English), and I obtained a number of recordings likely unavailable outside of Japan. A number of these were live recordings conducted by Carlos Kleiber, such as his amazing, unforgettable (I was there!) live *La Bohème* at the Met from 1988, with Freni and Pavarotti (on the evocatively-named Siberian Tiger label, ST009-10). The Japanese fascination with musical Vienna was demonstrated by a compilation of historic recordings by the Rosé Quartet and the Mairecker-Buxbaum Quartet (EMI The Great Recordings of German and Austrian String Quartets, volume 2, SGR-8502).

Based on information on the Internet it seems that this store has unfortunately closed. But this single visit, together with one to the Tokyo

Tower store, was enough to show me that Japanese record stores generally put their Western counterparts to shame (and by all reports, the Tower store there is still going strong).

Other independents

I have visited many other memorable stores that are now defunct. In New York City there was a store near Herald Square selling all kinds of LPs that was squalid and in truth little more than a junk shop. Yet searching through stacks of records there yielded some finds, such as a perfect set, still sealed in plastic, of the Cetra Live set of the 1941 Met *Trovatore* with Jussi Björling (Cetra LO 71). Also in New York, the lamented Patelson Music House (on West 56th Street just behind Carnegie Hall) at one time had a choice collection of rare vocal LPs that gradually shrunk over time in both quality and quantity; it was there I acquired a “pirate” LP of live performances of Elisabeth Rethberg that includes an amazingly intense rendition of the finale from *Il Trovatore* with Giovanni Martinelli (MDP 034).

A much more elegant shopping environment was the shop in the centre of Geneva (Switzerland), close to the Gare Cornavin, that I visited in the 1970s and 1980s a couple of times. The shop (the name of which I have been unable to track down) was dedicated to classical vocal LPs, and stocked a mixture of labels with live performances and records of historical singers. There I found a set on the HRE label with beautiful live performances of a young singer who at the time had made only a few commercial recordings but was destined for great things, namely Kiri Te Kanawa (HRE 290-2). I also bought a recital (Rubini GV-39) of the most aristocratic vocalist ever, Pol Plancon, and the owner complimented me on my choice of singers (though at the time I was a novice collector who had never heard the great French bass, but was moved to buy the LP from the description of his singing in Steane’s *The Grand Tradition*). I returned to the location of the shop several years later, but it was occupied by a different business, and not a trace of it was to be found.

And while it was not a “store”, I have fond memories of record-buying at the annual sale of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. One had to queue early on a Sunday morning for this, and a long line formed, with the collectors at the front of the line grabbing the choicest items, so that latecomers were likely to find little of interest. But somehow I managed to acquire, for just a couple of dollars, a set of one of the live *Carmens* of Rosa Ponselle (the Met performance of 28 March, 1936, EJS 116); imagine my amazement when, upon examining the records, I found each of them autographed by Ponselle,

and inscribed “To Carmela with love, Rosa” (obviously a gift to the singer’s sister that had somehow entered the library’s collection).

Conclusion

Looking back, I regard these record stores not merely as commercial enterprises, but temples of knowledge where a young collector and music enthusiast could learn about recordings, singers, and the repertoire, and where recordings were viewed as valuable cultural artefacts.

Thankfully, a few examples of this type of establishment continue to survive (for example, the wonderful stores Da Caruso and Teuchtler in Vienna), but never again will there be so many classical record stores that existed as more than just places to make money. The best way to honour them is to remember the important cultural role they played, and to do our best to see that similar institutions of whatever type are established and maintained to encourage and educate younger collectors, as essential elements of a civilization that values great music and great performances.