

## **A Comeback for Classical Music, the Triumph of Culture over Decadence...Oops, Never Mind!**

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A glance at Amazon Germany's best selling CDs last week would have revealed the following astonishing top ten list:

1. J.Lo (Jennifer Lopez)
2. Wagner's Ring (Furtwangler)
3. One (The Beatles)
4. Viva Verdi
5. Beethoven String Quartets (Alban Berg Quartet)
6. Beethoven Symphonies/Concerti (Klemperer, Barenboim)
7. No Angel (Dido)
8. Richard Strauss: Orchestral Works (Kempe)
9. Sing When You're Winning (Robbie Williams)
10. Bach Organworks (Jacob)

Six out of the top ten best-selling CDs are classical. And not just any old "Mozart for Your Mind" mass-market oriented CD, mind you. At number two we have a 14-CD set of Wilhelm Furtwangler's historic performance of Wagner's epic Ring Cycle, some 15 hours of the most difficult-to-absorb music ever penned by man. Yes, it's the one with the large women in Viking helmets.

While "Viva Verdi" at number four looks like it conceivably might belong, numbers 5,6, 8, and 10 look rather out-of-place. So what could account for this apparent rediscovery of classical music, appropriately enough in the country that spawned many of the leading composers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries?

As it turns out, most likely nothing other than an error by some low-paid clerical worker deep in the heart of amazon.de (that's the German version of amazon.com), who evidently priced these mega-CD sets at the price of a single CD on sale—roughly \$7 plus shipping.

Ok, so somewhere in Germany some CD sets that three people in the entire world are likely to be looking for in any given month were mispriced. Ten years ago that would have been like the proverbial tree falling in the forest. This is the Internet Age, however, and it was not long before news of the mistake spread worldwide, at roughly the speed of light. It started innocently enough with a posting on "rec.music.classical.recordings," one of the thousands of so-called Usenet newsgroups, electronic bulletin boards in which hobbyists, fanatics, serious scholars, and teenagers from around the world all communicate with each other. There are newsgroups for sports fans of all stripes (rec.sport.cricket anyone? Or rec.sport.paintball?), would-be political pundits on every topic imaginable (try talk.politics.mideast, or, if that doesn't

grab you, perhaps talk.politics.tibet). Those of a more anthropological bent might try soc.culture.afghanistan, or perhaps soc.culture.berber. You get the idea.

In addition to the hundreds of regular participants in “RMCR” (as the insiders call it) there are also untold hundreds or perhaps thousands of “lurkers”—people who scan the bulletin board regularly for information, recommendations, and just plain entertainment. Many of the regulars are self-proclaimed addicts, who have CD collections numbering in the thousands, or even tens of thousands, with strong opinions on the relative merits of each and every one of them (and on many others as well). Many own dozens of recordings of the same piece of music. (And, as an interesting sidelight, roughly 98.5 percent of the participants appear to be adult males, though, as the famous New Yorker cartoon reminded us, “no one knows” for sure.)

Getting back to that innocent posting, a gentleman from Europe sent the following message, dated Tuesday, January 30 (under the subject heading “fortunate mispricing at e-shop”):

German Amazon seems to have mispriced a number of EMI-boxes....  
A friend pointed this out to me last week. I haven't checked whether they've already corrected it. I also don't know for certain whether they actually send you the cd's for that price. So don't shoot the messenger.

This led directly to more than 60 responses, including helpful instructions for those having difficulty navigating the German website (one message included a web address for a free site that translates text). Alongside those, several other “threads” (chains of messages under the same subject heading) developed. A quick search using the keyword “amazon.de” yielded around 200 messages posted over a three-day period.

Well, apparently it wasn't long before someone at amazon.de discovered what had happened, and unceremoniously cancelled all of the orders. This was first reported in a message entitled “Party's over for Amazon.de's Ring!” There was a cavalcade of sorrowful messages, each relating how his order had been cancelled. Some kept their sense of humor (“I guess the Germans are trying to get rid of their reputation as people who blindly follow orders”), but others described a range of emotions from “crushed” to “miffed.” As one disappointed contributor put it, “After . . . a *great* day yesterday, I'm suddenly beginning to feel quite miserable today. . . .”

That might well have been the end of the story. But this is also the Age of Entitlement. New messages began to appear. One example: “I have written a letter to Amazon.de asking them to honor their ‘sale’ prices. Does anyone here have a way of finding out about German consumer protection laws?” Before long, momentum for an uprising gathered. Another post appeared, under the heading “Amazon.de: A Call to Action,” suggesting the following strategy:

1. Enlist the aide of a German (or at least EU-native German-speaking) RMCR'r, preferably one with some legal background.
2. If there is any ground to stand on, we should consolidate our order

position through this individual by forwarding our original order confirms.

3. The German media should be notified.

While some had their tongues firmly in-cheek, many were dead serious. Said one: “We should make the biggest stink possible. Maybe we’ll shame them into honoring their deal.” There then ensued various spin-off threads on some of the arcane legal issues involved (some of the participants being lawyers).

In the end? By day 6 the “amazon.de” storm seemed to have subsided, and messages were again appearing with titles such as “Reiner or Stokowski Shostakovitch 6?” “Poulenc and Debussy on Naxos,” and “Best LvB's Eroica Sym # 3, Kabasta or Mengelberg?” Amazon.de’s top ten list was now:

1. J.Lo (Jennifer Lopez )
2. No Angel (Dido)
3. One (Beatles)
4. One Touch (Sugababes)
5. Sing When You're Winning (Robbie Williams )
6. A Day Without Rain (Enya)
7. Lovers Rock (Sade)
8. Human Clay (Creed)
9. Bandits (Various)
10. Not That Kind (Anastacia)

Oh, and the Furtwangler Ring Cycle? Available for about \$90, plus \$15 shipping and handling. Its current amazon.de sales rank? 20,275. But classical lovers, take heart: “Viva Verdi” was hanging in there at number 22.