

The History of NAXOS

Klaus Heymann

Naxos is the brainchild of Klaus Heymann, a Hong Kong-based Music Executive.

Klaus Heymann went to Hong Kong in 1967 to start the office of an American weekly newspaper, The Overseas Weekly. Before coming to Hong Kong, he had worked for the same paper in his native city of Frankfurt for five years and for one year as Export Advertising and Promotion Manager for Max Braun AG, the well-known manufacturer of audio equipment, household appliances and electric shavers.

After two years with the Overseas Weekly in Hong Kong, he started his own business, initially a direct-mail advertising company and, subsequently, a mail-order firm for the members of the U.S. Armed Forces during the Vietnam War. The mail-order catalogue of Pacific Mail-Order System, the company started by Klaus Heymann, offered cameras, watches and audio equipment, including Bose loudspeakers and Revox tape recorders.

After the end of the Vietnam War, he became the distributor for Hong Kong and China of Bose and Revox equipment and, subsequently, also of the well-known Studer brand of studio recording equipment.

In order to promote the sales of Revox and Bose in Hong Kong, Klaus Heymann began to organise concerts of classical music sponsored by Revox and Bose. Since he had been fond of classical music ever since he was a child (he attended his first classical concert at the age of 10) the artists invited for the concerts in Hong Kong were classical artists. Many of them had made recordings for various classical labels, but when they performed in Hong Kong, they could not find these recordings in the shops.

As a result, in addition to distributing Bose and Revox equipment, Klaus Heymann started to import several classical labels, among them Vox-Turnabout, Hungaroton, Supraphon, Opus and others.

Because of the success of his concerts (they were well-organised and promoted) he was invited to join the board of the then-amateur Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra. Within a year of having joined the board, the Hong Kong Philharmonic was a full-time professional orchestra... Klaus Heymann had taken on the positions of "Chairman of the Fund-Raising Committee" and "Honorary General Manager". Through his association with the Hong Kong Philharmonic he met his future wife, the Japanese violinist Takako Nishizaki...she came to play as a soloist with the Hong Kong Philharmonic during its first professional season. The concerto she played on that occasion was the Second Concerto by Henryk Wieniawski... the couple's only son was therefore named "Henryk". A year after their first meeting, they were married and Takako moved from her native Japan to Hong Kong.

The First Recordings

Klaus Heymann now had a world-class violinist living in Hong Kong with very little or nothing to do. In order to keep her busy until she could build up her own career in Asia, he started to make recordings with her, among them the Complete Works of Fritz Kreisler. In order to establish herself better in Hong Kong, in 1978 Takako Nishizaki recorded the famous Chinese Violin Concerto, "The Butterfly Lovers", with the Nagoya Philharmonic (the orchestra of her home town) conducted by the Indonesian-Chinese Lim Kek-Tjiang. The recording became an enormous success... hundreds of thousands of copies were sold legitimately in Hong Kong and South East Asia, and many more were pirated in Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore. In Mainland China millions of copies were sold between 1978 and today.

After this first great success with Chinese symphonic music, Klaus Heymann started a label devoted to this type of repertoire, called simply "HK". Initially, all recordings were made in Japan... the Hong Kong Philharmonic was not yet up to the standard required for commercial recordings. However, from 1982 Klaus Heymann also started recording with the Hong Kong Philharmonic and, shortly afterwards, with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. In the meantime, his record business had grown... Heymann's record company, Pacific Music, was distributing more and more classical labels, among them Erato and Teldec, and eventually also started to import and license pop labels such as RCA, Arista, Virgin, Chrysalis, Fantasy and many others for Hong Kong and South-East Asia. From 1978, when the first version of Butterfly Lovers had been recorded by Heymann's record company until 1986, Pacific Music became the biggest international record company in South East Asia, with subsidiaries in Malaysia and Singapore and licensees in Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines and Thailand. In the meantime, the Musical Directors of the orchestras in Hong Kong and Singapore discussed the possibility, with Pacific Music, of recording Western repertoire... they were not satisfied with only producing best-selling recordings of Chinese material.

Obviously, it would not have made sense to record standard repertoire with Asian orchestras and Heymann hit on the idea of recording rarities and, for this purpose, founded the Marco Polo label. Initially, all Marco Polo releases were recorded in Hong Kong and Singapore but eventually production was shifted to Hungary and Czechoslovakia because of the business connections with Hungaroton and the Slovak Opus label both of which had been distributed by Pacific Music since 1975.

Marco Polo started to grow into a well-respected label offering primarily symphonic repertoire composed between 1850 and the early part of the twentieth century. By 1987 Pacific Music had a well-organised production machinery for Marco Polo in place in both Hungary and Slovakia (Bratislava).

The Birth of Naxos

When the manufacturing cost of compact discs started to drop in 1986, and manufacturing capacity became more easily available, Klaus Heymann saw an opportunity for a budget-priced CD label. Music lovers in Asia, outside of Japan, had always been used to relatively cheap LP's and cassettes which typically sold for about one third of the prices prevailing in Western Europe and the United States. However, when the CD started to take off in the rest of the world, sales stagnated in South-East Asia as CD's were selling at regular, international price levels, about three or four times the price of an LP or cassette.

Heymann's original aim was to offer his customers in South-East Asia classical CD's at the same price as LP's and when he released the first five Naxos CD's in 1987 they retailed in Hong Kong at about US\$6.25 (at today's exchange rate) whereas other CD's were retailing at US\$15-20.

In the beginning, Pacific Music had licensed thirty titles from a German company which had produced them, in co-operation with Opus in Bratislava in 1984, but had been unable to release them on CD due to lack of capacity and the high cost of manufacturing the CD's.

The first releases were an immediate success and Klaus Heymann's telephone started ringing with people calling from all over the world trying to find out how they could get these fantastically cheap CD's. Originally, Pacific Music had acquired the rights to these thirty master recordings only for South-East Asia but subsequently licensed them for the rest of the world as well.

However, only a few months later it turned out that the German company from which Pacific Music had obtained the rights had licensed the same recordings to many other companies in Europe and the European sales of Naxos dropped overnight. In the meantime, Klaus Heymann had recognised the enormous potential of a quality classical budget CD and, instead of giving up and withdrawing from the business, he decided to start a proper classical label, with a well-planned catalogue so as to become independent from licensed material.

Being a small, independent record label at the time, Naxos could not afford to record standard repertoire with internationally famous artists and orchestras. It was therefore decided to build the Naxos catalogue entirely with young or unknown artists and orchestras which had had no proper exposure in the world market. Because a production machinery was in place in Bratislava and Budapest, it was decided to start recording in these two places. This is why all early Naxos recordings came from Slovakia and Hungary. The first priority was to replace the licensed titles and then to build up the basic standard repertoire. It was envisaged that the Naxos catalogue would comprise no more than fifty releases. Klaus Heymann was concerned that the major record companies operating in the classical-music field would soon enter the market and force Naxos out of business. However, it turned out that the majors misjudged the market and did not compete with Naxos in its budget price range until much later.

The Naxos Secret

Klaus Heymann then decided that Naxos would become a full-fledged classical label committed to offering beginning and serious collectors a full range of classical music, in state-of-the-art digital recordings with CD-length playing times, with performances comparable to the best that the major record companies had to offer, at a budget price. Of course, there was always concern that the major record companies would launch competing labels but Naxos pushed ahead nevertheless.

Part of Naxos' success must also be attributed to the many qualified producers and engineers the label was able to engage in the locations where it recorded. Initially, teams were sent from Western Europe to the East to assure technical and artistic quality of international standards but, subsequently, local producers and engineers were trained, who today produce most of the recordings in Eastern Europe.

It was also decided that all releases should have informative, well-written music notes initially only in English but, later on, also in German and French.

Another very important decision was made right at the beginning... there would be little or no duplication of repertoire and, once a recording of the highest artistic and technical quality was in the catalogue, it would not be replaced by another, merely to satisfy an artist's desire to record the same repertoire.

Once production had been organised distribution became the next priority for Naxos. It was important that the label should have more or less the same retail price all around the world and that it should be as widely available as possible. Building up a world-wide distribution network took many years and only in 1994 did Naxos succeed in establishing itself in every important music market in the world.

Once Naxos had established its credibility as a quality budget label, it became possible to record in the West and, in 1996, more than 75% of all Naxos recordings will be produced in Western Europe and North America. Even as sales grew, and the label started to make substantial profits, the artistic policy remained unchanged, i.e. Naxos continued to record new artists and orchestras. Aided by competent advisors world-wide, Naxos established an impressive track record of discovering new talents in all fields of music, from opera to early music.

Increasingly, entire cycles of works were recorded or are in the process of being recorded such as the Complete Works of Chopin, the Complete Symphonies of Mozart, Haydn, Schubert, Beethoven, Dvorák, Schumann, Brahms, Mahler, Sibelius, Nielsen, Elgar, Lutoslawski and others.

In the field of chamber music, Naxos is now perhaps the leading classical label regardless of price. Currently, the complete string quartets of Haydn, Mozart, Schubert and Beethoven are being produced and other complete chamber-music cycles are already scheduled.

Naxos continues to retail more or less at the prices at which it originally was introduced into the world market... inflation-related increases in production and overhead costs were compensated for by the drop in the manufacturing costs of CD's.

Furthermore, Naxos continues to record as economically today as it did when the label first started. Overheads and staff costs are kept to the absolute minimum when compared with the major record companies. No money is wasted on unnecessary expenses such as large delegations of hangers-on at recording sessions and expensive artist promotions. Naxos artists do not get famous through glossy brochures and full-colour advertisements in the international press but by producing first-class recordings which sell in large quantities throughout the world. Also, the policy of not duplicating repertoire represents a tremendous saving for Naxos as it enables the label to expand its catalogue rather than wasting money on different, or not-so-different, versions of the same standard repertoire.

As of the middle of 1996, the Naxos catalogue comprised some 1400 different catalogue numbers covering more than 6000 different compositions. More than 200 new releases were already produced and in the pipeline and another 250 had been scheduled.

Plans for the future

Major projects to be completed over the next few years include the complete piano music of Franz Liszt on more than 75 CD's; the complete piano sonatas of Scarlatti on more than 25 CD's; the orchestral works of Lutoslawski, Stravinsky and Bartók; the complete organ and keyboard works of J.S. Bach; the complete piano music of Schumann and Schubert; the complete madrigals of Monteverdi; the complete piano trios of Haydn (following the success of the Haydn String Quartets); the symphonic compositions and piano solo works of Scriabin and others.

Increasingly works by composers that would have been considered unsuitable for Naxos, because they were not by mainstream classical composers, are being scheduled for recording... Liapunov, Dohnanyi, Schnittke, Gubaidulina, to name just a few. Also, at the other end of the musical spectrum, Naxos has embarked on a programme to record a great deal of early music and music from the Baroque.

Also, to establish Naxos as a true "World" label, Naxos is increasingly working with artists and orchestras in its main markets such as the UK, France, Canada, Australia, Germany and the United States.

It is anticipated that the catalogue will grow at the rate of about 150 new releases per year and that, before too long, the classical music lover will find practically all the repertoire he may be interested in on Naxos, in technical and artistic quality comparable to that of full price labels at one third or one quarter the price of these labels.

Unlike many of its competitors, Naxos has recognised the importance of educating the public and either introducing it to classical music or expanding the knowledge of the beginning collector. As a result, Naxos has produced a number of brochures and booklets to assist both the complete beginner and the more advanced collector.

Its "How to Build a Classical CD Collection" introduces the beginner to 120 different CD's, representative of classical music and ranked in order of accessibility. The recommended collection starts with Vivaldi's Four Seasons and Mozart's Eine Kleine Nachtmusik and ends with Albinoni Oboe Concerti and the Vivaldi Flute Concerti. Naxos also produces a two-CD set with a sixty-page booklet entitled "Discover Classical Music". The booklet gives an overview of classical music, with a short history, information about the various instruments used in the performance of classical music, short biographies of the most important composers and their works and recommended listening. There is also an almost 300-page CD-box-sized book entitled "The A to Z of Classical Music" which gives information on all the most important composers and their works, again with recommended listening, as well as easy-to-understand explanations of musical terms and a listing of classical music used in films.

With these brochures and booklets, the superb artistic and technical quality of its CD's and its low price, Naxos aims at making music accessible to everybody, especially young people and beginners. Through its policy of recording complete work cycles and marginal classical repertoire, Naxos also enables the serious collector to enlarge his collection at a modest cost and to try out works which he would not have purchased at full price.

Naxos is also working with experts in the field of music education to produce a series of music lessons, each consisting of a CD of musical examples, a text book for the teachers and work sheets for the students, to enable music teachers in primary and secondary schools to teach classical music more effectively.

The Philosophy of Naxos

Naxos, the Greek island where Ariadne was once abandoned by Theseus to the mercies of Dionysus, has now become a word familiar to all record buyers, the name of a CD label which has impressed collectors by its quality, range and, not least, its price.

There is no doubt that Klaus Heymann and his colleagues and advisers in many countries share a strong belief in the Naxos principle, the provision of a wide range of good music, well played and recorded and available at a relatively modest price. The label and the mission have been astonishingly successful and this success lies in the flexibility of a stream-lined operation, the willingness to accept new repertoire ideas and the emphasis on the music itself rather than on the performer. Naxos does, of course, record musicians of great distinction, but it has, in general avoided the common practice of putting the cart before the horse, the player before the composer. Music always comes first.

Concentration on music rather than performer eliminates duplication of repertoire. There is no need to produce rival sets of standard repertoire under different conductors in what must now seem suicidal self-competition. The Naxos principle has been, by and large, to issue one version only, which stands on its own merit. The choice of repertoire and of performers is often a matter of local knowledge on the part of representatives of the company in different parts of the world. This internationalisation has had the effect of opening new doors, of introducing music by composers of distinguished local reputation to a much wider public. In this respect Naxos goes hand in hand with its full price sister-label, Marco Polo, which has won its own reputation for pioneering exploration of music that has often been undeservedly neglected. Marco Polo has made its way to China, but was also the first to start to bring to attention music of the earlier twentieth century that suffered temporary oblivion for political reasons. Something of the spirit of Marco Polo has inevitably found its way on to Naxos, where repertoire that once seemed of limited possible interest now finds a wider audience, matching ever-broadening public taste. Naxos repertoire now extends from Ambrosian and Gregorian Chant to Boulez and Lutosl/awski, taking in Orazio Vecchi and Monteverdi, the sons of Bach and others on the way. The ultimate aim is to offer a complete conspectus of classical music, a completeness already seen in the continuing recording of the five hundred or so concertos by Vivaldi and by the ambitious Organ Eycyclopedia.

Because every recording involves a diversity of forces, long-term planning is a key element of such a vast operation. Individual contracts must be negotiated and prepared; orchestra, conductors, soloists and choirs must find available time in busy concert schedules; top quality producers and engineers, often travelling from one country to another, are chosen from a carefully selected team, and there is a constant search for 'ideal' halls and recording locations whose acoustics will enhance the quality of the recorded sound. The result is a complicated (and often frustrating!) logistical jigsaw puzzle, into which all the pieces must fit.

Some collectors may imagine that recording session is rather like a concert: that the musicians play through a work, listen to the tape and, satisfied that there are no glaring mistakes, go home. There are even some collectors who assume that recordings, like radio broadcasts, are simply tapings of 'five' performances, with extraneous audience noises removed. This is seldom, if ever, true. Sessions usually take place in a specially selected hall, during three-hour segments, and few recordings can be completed in less than twelve hours of playing-time. After the engineer has made tests to ensure that the recorded sound has been carefully 'balanced' with performers play the work many times over, pausing to listen to 'playbacks' with the producer and engineer, to make sure that the sound, the accuracy of the playing and, even more important, the interpretation of the music, represents their wishes.

Working in the Control room, the engineer constantly supervises his 'balance', converting the different individual microphone sources to a stereo master, while the producer acting as a 'second pair of ears' for the performers (and with one eye on that ever-ticking clock!) reads a copy of the score, noting down the most - and the least - successful 'takes' of the performance. The sessions require detailed application and concentration from everyone involved, and many musicians have likened a recording to "playing three concerts in one afternoon". It is a demanding and exhausting test of their abilities, and artists often find they are called upon to distill a lifetime of study and preparation of a work in that critical three-hour period.

When everyone is satisfied that the best has been achieved, the producer and engineer return to base to begin the editing process. Once again, this can be a lengthy operation: 'takes' are re-examined, the musicians' preferences are noted, and the producer builds a master-plan of the score, indicating which parts of each performance should be incorporated. The sections are then 'spliced' together, to create the final 'master'.

It has been suggested that it is in some way 'immoral' to splice one take with another, but in fairness to the artist (who will have played the work many times before,) and to the listener, who is entitled to hear the best that is available, the removal of minor imperfections is essential to the quality of the finished performance. It has also been noted many times that, while an inaccurate performance can be corrected, one cannot make a 'bad' performance 'good'. Splicing is only used to make sure that the listener derives the greatest enjoyment from a performance.

Finally, when the master is completed, it is sent to the artist for approval. No Naxos disc is issued without this important 'seal of approval', which allows the performer any last-minute corrections that may have been overlooked, or even second thoughts about the interpretation.

While producers and engineers are working on the recorded material, Naxos headquarters is preparing the various elements that contribute to the final package. Specialists in the field write album notes to accompany the music, which often involves a worldwide quest for the most informed authors, particularly in the case of a recording 'premiere'. The Art Department has the task of finding new and attractive cover designs, using extensive research into great art collections or commissioning new artwork. Timings must be collated, publishers must be acknowledged, biographies updated, and an enormous amount of detail, specific to each production, is assembled.

It is worth mentioning at this stage that the digital recording system, whereby the sound is stored and reproduced via a computer, ensures that the listener hears a final product that has the same perfect recording quality as the original session, even though the production process has involved copying the original several times. Technology has advanced a long way since the 'bad old days' of tape "hiss" or "sputtering" microphones and, without going into baffling technical jargon, one might compare this with using a modern photo-copier against the old system of typing with sheets of carbon-paper. When you reach the sixth or seventh sheet, the carbon copy has begun to fade or lose clarity. Using a photo-copier, the fiftieth copy still has the same clarity, sharp focus and detail of the original. In future years, even better recording systems may be introduced, and collectors can be assured that the technical staff of Naxos, who constantly monitor technological advances, will be at the forefront of such developments.

When the master has been approved technically and musically, it is passed to a studio which adds the final 'read-out' information (Band numbers, second-by-second timing etc.) that will appear on a CD machine as the record plays. This also affords a last opportunity to check every detail of the process to date. Once all the ingredients have been approved, the studio creates a master CD for the factory and pressing plant which, through a series of processes, (not unlike the negative from which a finished photograph is made) can manufacture finished discs for domestic use. Every Naxos CD is a sophisticated, high-precision instrument which, through the application of the latest digital technology, reproduces the finest musical performances in brilliant and natural-sounding recordings.

It is evident from all this that even a single disc can represent many hundreds of hours of work: planning, preparation, recording, editing and manufacture. The many and varied CD's that fill the special Naxos stands in records stores around the world represent the achievements of an international army of specialists who have helped to create a record company that is already in the premier position in many countries.