

## ***Streaming - Friend or Foe?***

By Patrick C Waller

I remember well the 5th September 1991. I think it was the last time I stood in the Arena at the Proms; Simon Rattle conducted the CBSO in a memorable performance of Mahler's 9th. The reason why I know the date is that it was also the first anniversary of my mother's premature death. The other memory I have is of spending a long time queuing outside and talking to a fellow collector of classical CDs, which had been around for 8 years at the time. We had both amassed about 300 discs, including Rattle and the CBSO's recently issued discs of Nicholas Maw's *Odyssey*. But the striking thing was the unusual way in which my acquaintance listened to his discs. Apparently, he filed them in order of acquisition and claimed to adhere strictly to that order when listening. This meant that he was going to listen to all his 300 other CDs before he would allow himself to listen to *Odyssey* again!

If you have forgiven the obliquity of the introduction and are still with me, then the point of the story is to preface some thoughts about how we listen to recorded music and, more specifically, the impact on that of being able to stream music. Back in 1991 I suspect there would have been few people who would have had any idea of what would become possible within 25 years. For consumers, the digital age has massively increased choice and driven down prices but it is the advent of streaming that I feel will ultimately have the greatest impact. There are many sources of streaming but I only have significant experience of two major ones - the [Naxos Music Library](#) and [Spotify](#), both of which I believe are recommendable. They have a similar and very high level of coverage of classical music (Spotify has much more of other genres) and cost a similar amount - about £10 a month - for unlimited usage. So, for about that amount of money, for practical purposes you can listen to just about anything you want, at any time, and anywhere. In the case of Spotify, you can actually do that for free if you are willing to tolerate advertisements between tracks, and you can even avoid them by hitting the mute button. There is so much to choose from that the most difficult thing about all this is deciding what to pick next.

I recently listened to the whole of Karajan's *Ring* via Spotify. Through my hi-fi at a bitrate of 320kbps it sounded very well for its 50-year age. It played continuously without any hiccoughs between tracks and there was an advantage of no mid-act interruptions to change disc. I had only listened to a few extracts before and was glad to have heard it but I have never considered buying this version, even though (or perhaps because) I have acquired ten other versions of the great tetralogy. Living on a pension and with full CD shelves and nearly full hard drives, I don't really buy much music these days. When I do purchase (or subscribe) it is usually to support exceptional enterprises such as Toccata Classics and EM Records which are recording worthwhile music we would otherwise be unable to hear. The other main exception is when recordings I particularly want to hear are not available to stream. The most frequent in that regard are discs from a few labels such as Hyperion (e.g. the recent [Potter Piano Concertos](#)) who refuse to allow their music to be streamed. My understanding is that they believe that it undermines the economics of making recordings. Perhaps there are some people who feel they have to then own excellent recordings initially heard through streaming. But aside from natural human reluctance to spend money, the question is how often are you going to listen to them again (and can my acquaintance from '91 possibly still be set in his ways)? And, if you are out and about, it might be easier to stream again, even if the recording is sitting on a hard drive or shelf back home.

I do understand the desire for a physical product that is still keeping CD production alive and also that 320kbps mp3 sound is not enough for audiophiles. However, if you want to stream at CD quality or even higher, this is possible from sites such as [Qobuz](#) or [Primephonic](#), the latter being dedicated to classical music. Streaming is obviously here to stay, and classical music has been and is likely to remain a passenger its development. For now, the classical recording industry still seems to be bearing up but I just wonder how long that can last when people like me are effectively paying them pennies to listen to discs that not long ago we paid £10 plus to own. None of the above should be taken as being a complaint - personally I am delighted to have such broad access to explore unfamiliar music and recordings. But is it sustainable I wonder?