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Norman Lebrecht

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CLASSICAL
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20 WORST RECORDINGS EVER MADE

- by -

NORMAN LEBRECHT



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Norman Lebrecht : The Life and Death of Classical Music: Featuring the 100 Best and 20 Worst Recordings Ever Made before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Life and Death of Classical Music: Featuring the 100 Best and 20 Worst Recordings Ever Made:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. YEAH, MR. LEBRECHT, A SAD TIMEBy W. R. JenkinsonThe

book, in great depth, describes what I have seen, felt and feared for sometime: the not-so-slow demise of the classical music recording industry as well as the dwindling attendance at concert hall "live" classical performances. Popular music continues to steam ahead, because it can feed our very short musical attention spans with new versions, performance groups, arrangements, even totally new original pieces every few months. (How about weeks ... days!) That's something you won't ever see happening in the world of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, etc. (Though some try dumb-downed, faux classical attempts, with huge under-the-stars orchestras and pretty blond and gowned string players). Yep, the undiluted old master composers are fading. On the other hand, when they do appear in concert halls, we continue to hear over and over again a Beethoven 5th., an 1812 Overture, a tired Tchaikovsky violin or piano concerto, whether it's the Boston, Chicago, Berlin, London (etc.) Symphony orchestra. That doesn't help. And the so-called modern, serious composers of today -- let's face it -- they have seldom become loved the way we love the old masters. When the new CDs came out in the eighties, what a great period that was for collectors. But I don't believe those days can ever be repeated. Not great news for many of us. Well, in a word -- sad. WRJ14 of 15 people found the following review helpful. Thought provoking if flawed look at an industry

By Larry VanDeSande
British entertainment journalist Norman Lebrecht is to classical music what Leonard Maltin is to the American film industry: a cultural commentator, part historian, part critic, part fan with the exception being Lebrecht is more flamboyant and covers an industry he decries in death throes. With his companion 1997 book, *Who Killed Classical Music?*, Lebrecht here defines a century of birth, life, expansion, realization, decline and, in his words, post-mortem for classical music. What he means by that is the birth, growth, heyday and decline of the major classical music labels -- Decca/London, DG, Sony, EMI, etc. -- and the end of civilization as he came to know it from his place reporting inside the industry. While I don't subscribe to his theory about classical music's death, I accept that the 20th century was a great time in the classical music and its recording industry. In 1941, before World War II started here, composer Dmitri Shostakovich appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, something that probably could not happen today. In the heyday of the 1960s, the world's greatest conductors were recording scores of LPs and fans were buying them in droves. Today, there is hardly a conductor worthy of mention in the same frame as the greats of the 1960s and none of them can match the sales figures of a Karajan or Toscanini. The best part of Lebrecht's little book, in my opinion, is the way he weaves that century of birth of the wax cylinder to 78 to LP that made classical music a household entity by about 1950. When stereo followed, a new form of excitement left us enraptured. Soon tape eliminated LP skips and pops and the CD was developed, a perfect form of recording. Lebrecht's book doesn't speak much to the download generation that now dominates music, in part because the book research ends about 2005 and was published in 2007. In the latter pages of the narrative -- before the author gets on with his highly personalized list of the 100 most important recordings and 20 that should never have seen the light of day -- he lays the death of classical music (via the diminution of the major labels) on these sources:-- Overproduction. This is what caused the stock market crashes of 1929 and 2008 and subsequent price deflation encouraged the Great Depression and the economic spiral after 2008. Deflation of CD prices is the parallel here -- almost nothing sells for list price and millions of titles are available for little. Ironically, this is what makes life so wonderful for classical music collectors shopping on : just about anything ever made is available somewhere, usually for a more than fair price.-- Indestructibility, mainly of the CD. This is where the book wasn't produced late enough for, today, people talk about the CD being dead, replaced by downloads.-- Noira Ogho, the head of Sony that tried to overtake DG late in the 20th century. I think this a figurehead for the excesses of major labels and concomitant bureaucracy that could not respond quickly in the leaned out new century. I saw this happen to the industry that dominates my backyard, the U.S. auto industry. Yet they still make millions of cars, just as the classical music industry still makes thousands of recordings.-- The Internet, Lebrecht says. "Google and brought the whole of Western Civilization to the world's fingertips. There was no further need to keep a reference collection of classical recordings." Had the book been written a few years later, he'd have added YouTube. Again, these are the entities that best serve classical music fans today. He concludes saying, "A failure of invention sunk the genre" meaning no new composers to keep fans interested. While I doubt many of the other elements of his argument, this one is clearly causal. Dmitri Shostakovich, that poster boy on *Time* magazine's cover, was the last living composer with a body of work equivalent to the greatest composers in history. He died 1975, nearly four decades ago. Imagine any other industry moving ahead with its last great creator being dead 40 years. What would be the state of popular music if The Beatles, who broke up about 1970, were the last great group before the public. Would anyone continue to listen, follow new artists, or buy new products? It's not the only thing that has affected classical music; here are others:-- The Second Viennese School, that collaboration of Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, Anton Webern and Hans Eisler, was pretty much the end of the line for classical music in Germany. While classical music flourished in the Soviet Union, the United States and France in the 20th century, there has not been a consensus master born Germany or Austria since the onset of atonalism prior to World War I. The Second Viennese School turned the German lineage from Bach to Haydn to Mozart to Beethoven to Brahms to Wagner to Mahler to noise and gave rise to minimalism. There hasn't been a great German composer since 19th century born Richard Strauss, who died 1949. Gustav Mahler (died 1911) was the last master symphonist. Who wrote the last great German piano concerto?-- Lebrecht said overproduction, I say overexposure. When Karajan recorded his 1963 Beethoven symphony set, he had only one other

stereo set to compete with, the one from Bruno Walter. It is difficult to say what the most recent set is, perhaps those from Gielen or Jan Willem de Vriend, but how many sets are available now? It has to be in the hundreds. I maxed out on Beethoven in the early 1980s, losing interest. It wasn't until Norrington's 1985 set came out in period detail that I became interested again. Now most either mimic what he started or go back in time to the old way. I wish there were other areas of my life where the available options were so great.-- The end of the star system. The postwar era is generally considered the golden age for classical music recording, in particular the era from about 1950-90, the year Leonard Bernstein died. Karajan died 1989. This period encapsulated just about every major conductor of the recording era from Furtwangler (died 1954) and Toscanini (died 1957) to Szell, Bohm, Kempe, Solti and through those greats born in the era who still may be recording such as Claudio Abbado, Colin Davis, Daniel Barenboim, Lorin Maazel and Bernard Haitink. As a music collector for 40 years, there is little question the latter five on this list never generated the excitement of their earlier brethren. Is there a young conductor on the horizon that could join yesterday's throng?-- The visual arts, film and theater. The 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th and first half of the 20th centuries were aural decades. Since then, we have entered a visual arts period. Richard Wagner spent a decade of his life writing his Ring tetralogy on German legend. Director Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings trilogy is the new century's equivalent. Would Steven Spielberg, had he been born 1896 instead of 1946, set Melville's Moby Dick to opera instead of Jaws to film? Wagner's concept of music-scene-drama was perfectly realized by film, which essentially killed opera. Simultaneously, music theater has continued to thrive, turning out hits like Cats, Les Miserables and Jersey Boys while classical music hasn't had a memorable symphony created since Henryk Goacute;recki's Symphony of Sorrowful Songs in 1976, the year after Shostakovich died. And finally...-- Classical music and its creative culture and product. It's a sad state of affairs for worldwide classical music when a mid-20th century composer like Samuel Barber has two more masterpieces regularly played and recorded worldwide than any composer now active, but that's the case with classical music. The plain fact is that, beginning with the Second Viennese School in the early 20th century, classical music since that time has let down its following and contributed more than anything else to the downward spiral of the art form. There hasn't been a classical music recording in the top of Billboard magazine's rankings since Gorecki's Symphony of Sorrowful Songs in 1976. While there has been interesting new music created and there have been composers that were attractive to hardcore classical fans, there has been nothing since the Gorecki symphony that created legions of new fans for classical music except the emergence of artists like Lang Lang in Asia, where more classical music fans exist than anywhere in the world. But that hasn't translated to bright new creative minds at the top of the creative pyramid. There is no question that the relative quality of music being created is the greatest reason for classical music's ongoing decline as a force in the world of art. With no top 25 creative mind since Shostakovich, it means classical music is going on four decades without a top composer. Try to find another period in classical music history since the Renaissance when this was the case. I'll bet you can't find one. I think these are the questions Lebrecht's book raises but does not answer. He seems to think classical music died with the major label system collapse. I don't think that's true. I agree there may never be another recording that sells 2 million downloads but it doesn't mean the industry is dead. The 1955-57 Chevys sold 2 million and there's never been a tryptich of vehicles that sold that number again. Part of that was because GM sold half the cars in the world in the 1950s; today they don't even sell half the cars in the United States. That industry's bigness died, too, but it didn't kill the industry. Isn't it the same with classical music? The latter half of Lebrecht's book is probably the more interesting part to most music fans. He details 100 recordings, beginning with Caruso's first recording, he says were historic points in time. He also has a list of 20 recordings he says should never have been made. I think his first list has greater justification but both are clearly personal sets. His book has other shortcomings, one being his list of the greatest selling recordings in history. He admits earlier in the book acquiring sales figures were difficult before the Internet and -- though he says the record industry cooperated with him on sales figures he included -- he proves that by omitting a recording that sold more than 2 million just in LP version -- this one. In fact, on page 225 of his book he admits this Dorati collection sold 2 million copies and was Decca's second-biggest seller to Solti's Ring. For me, the greatest joy of Lebrecht's books raise questions about the music industry they don't answer in far greater proportion to the issues he raises. I think ideas that classical music is dead is nonsense. There are more recordings available today than ever before, more live performances available than ever before, and everything ever made is available somewhere even if big labels and big city orchestras have seen their best days. Even though the Internet and new technologies rendered the LP and CD to a living past, they didn't kill them. When I visit my local music resale shop, I am encouraged by an LP revival among college age adults. However, I was discouraged to recently read that countertenor Andrea Scholl listens to music through his smart phone and ear plugs, a professional musician eschewing the concept that music is meant to be heard in space, not in confinement. To me, this means classical music has expanded, not contracted. 31 of 32 people found the following review helpful. An interesting but sloppy book By MacroV Unlike a lot of musicians and music lovers, I generally quite like Norman Lebrecht, find him one of the more interesting and provocative writers about the music scene, and have read several of his books. The first part of the book is interesting for his account of the many behind-the-scenes goings-on that have gone into the making of so many recordings, the personalities and egos of the musicians making them and, perhaps more critically, the enormously small stakes involved. Even though I've often

been amazed that commercial enterprises would spend so much money producing recordings that at best will appeal to five percent of the record-buying public, it's still astonishing to learn just how few copies some classical recordings, even by major artists, tend to sell. My major criticism of this book (and indeed most of Lebrecht's books) is that it's sloppy. He could use a good editor and fact-checker to catch such obvious errors as saying that around 1970 the Boston Symphony was still a non-union orchestra that worked "cheap." He also criticizes companies for continuing to issue new performances of the same repertory (fair enough), but then also ridicules them when they make recordings of less familiar repertoire that fail to sell in order to satisfy egomaniac conductors. Also, he often strings together anecdotes with very little thematic context or chronological coherence, often jumping several decades in the space of a sentence or two; if you aren't at least vaguely aware of a lot of these events, you'll be entirely lost (then again, if you're not vaguely aware of them, you probably won't be reading this book). As for his 100 best/20 worst list, his 100 best has a few whose significance I would question, and excludes some others I would add. I had a few disagreements with the "20 Worst" list, though: I LOVE Simon Rattle's "The Jazz Album" for the amazing clarinetist Michael Collins and the only performance that has ever made me like Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue). He also calls Gidon Kremer's Beethoven Violin Concerto recording (with the Schnittke cadenzas) a failure, not because it's a bad recording or was a bad idea, but because Philips apparently chickened out of promoting the novel cadenzas. I'm more in agreement with him about Bernstein's disastrous Enigma Variations. He probably should have added Bernstein's recording of West Side Story with Kiri Te Kanawa and Jose Carreras. It's also important to point out, as others have, that the title is misleading: Lebrecht is talking mostly about the life and death of the classical record industry, rather than classical music itself (though he does make the usual points about declining audiences). Definitely worth reading if you're into this sort of thing.

In this compulsively readable, fascinating, and provocative guide to classical music, Norman Lebrecht, one of the world's most widely read cultural commentators tells the story of the rise of the classical recording industry from Caruso's first notes to the heyday of Bernstein, Glenn Gould, Callas, and von Karajan. Lebrecht compellingly demonstrates that classical recording has reached its end point—but this is not simply an exposé of decline and fall. It is, for the first time, the full story of a minor art form, analyzing the cultural revolution wrought by Schnabel, Toscanini, Callas, Rattle, the Three Tenors, and Charlotte Church. It is the story of how stars were made and broken by the record business; how a war criminal conspired with a concentration-camp victim to create a record empire; and how advancing technology, boardroom wars, public credulity and unscrupulous exploitation shaped the musical backdrop to our modern lives. The book ends with a suitable shrine to classical recording: the author's critical selection of the 100 most important recordings—and the 20 most appalling. Filled with memorable incidents and unforgettable personalities—from Goddard Lieberson, legendary head of CBS Masterworks who signed his letters as God; to Georg Solti, who turned the Chicago Symphony into "the loudest symphony on earth"—this is at once the captivating story of the life and death of classical recording and an opinionated, insider's guide to appreciating the genre, now and for years to come. From the Trade Paperback edition.