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## New Ways to Buy Bach Online

*A site that promises to give classical composers their due*

By JOHN JURGENSEN

Technology entrepreneur Pierre Schwob thinks Bach and Beethoven haven't been given their due in the digital age.

[Classical Archives](#), a new digital store focused exclusively on classical music, is Mr. Schwob's answer to mass-market digital retailers with "a complete lack of understanding of how classical music should be offered," down to the way they often categorize recordings. "It's basically a lack of respect when you say Bach is an 'artist,' not a composer," Mr. Schwob says.

For example, when online shoppers type "Beethoven" into iTunes, the top results they get back include a rock medley by the Trans-Siberian Orchestra, an uncredited recording of "Für Elise" and individual movements culled from greatest hits collections. It's not that the music seller is skimping on the composer -- customers can find complete works by browsing deeper in the iTunes classical section -- it's just that his oeuvre doesn't fit neatly on the virtual shelves with that of Miley Cyrus and the Black Eyed Peas.

An Apple spokesman said that the setup of iTunes encourages browsing across genres, and that the store has bolstered its classical service by adding new features, such as a "power search" that allows shoppers to hone in on composers.

Classical music came late to the digital-music revolution, but the genre is poised to play catch-up as a crop of specialty music sellers jockey to meet the demands of core listeners. With a test version already online, [Classical Archives](#) officially opens May 19. [ArkivMusic](#), a popular online store that based its business model on classical fans' loyalty to CDs, began offering downloads last January. [Naxos](#), a record label and retailer that spearheaded the genre's digital push, is preparing to roll out "lossless" downloads, a format with audio quality some experts say is on par with CDs. And [Passionato](#), a digital store that debuted last fall in the U.K., is trying to secure funding for a U.S. launch this year, having overestimated the current demand for digital music in Europe, according to founder James Glicker.

The industry needs such ventures. "The bread and butter of what we do has really been lost in the decline of those great physical record stores," says Chris Roberts, president of classics and jazz for Universal Music Group International.

Mr. Schwob, a businessman who is largely unknown in the insular world of orchestras and operas, has put some \$4 million of his own money into the launch of [Classical Archives](#), which is a new version of a site Mr. Schwob founded 15 years ago. His site's selling points: an emphasis on high-quality audio and a browsing system designed by musicologists (including an architect of one of the Web's most popular music services, Pandora) to satisfy aficionados and novices alike.

There's no guarantee, however, that classical fans will flock to digital stores online. "Just because we're available digitally doesn't mean we've created demand," says Eric Dingman, president of EMI Classics.

In recent years, the genre's annual sales have hovered below 3% of all recorded music, according to the Recording

Industry Association of America. That means a digital-only classical store limits itself to "a slice of a slice" of the music business, says Eric Feidner, president of ArkivMusic. As consumers go digital (about 20% of the 3.4 million classical albums sold so far this year were digital downloads, up from 12% in the same period last year, according to Nielsen SoundScan) Mr. Feidner's strategy is to move gradually into downloads.

Anyone jumping into the digital music business has to reckon with the dominance of iTunes, which last year overtook Wal-Mart as the biggest music retailer and sells approximately 80% of all legal music downloads. But Classical Archives, with a staff of just 20 people and no advertising campaign to speak of, hopes to corner the digital market for classical. "We're happy to leave rock and pop to iTunes," Mr. Schwob says.

Classical Archives carries the digital catalogs of some 100 record labels, from majors such as Universal and EMI, to European independents including Harmonia Mundi. The company offers two ways of listening: streaming audio and downloads. For a monthly fee of \$9.95 (or \$99.50 a year) members can listen to any titles they want to by streaming them over the Internet. Members receive a discount of about 10% on the price of downloads. (The store uses the highest sound quality available for MP3s, a user-friendly format that can be played on most devices, including iPods, unlike the lossless digital formats that many audiophiles prefer.)

Unlike younger musical styles such as rock and roll, which are typically categorized by the names of performers and their recordings, the 1,000-year history of classical music is based on composers and their written repertoire. Classical Archives uses these works as the foundation of its navigation system.

For example, Mozart's repertoire is presented by categories, including operas, chamber works and vocal music. Clicking on "Don Giovanni" leads to a selection of tabs that include a history of the opera and an inventory of 128 recordings of it, which can be sorted by performer or release date.

Edward Bilous, a New York composer on the faculty of the Juilliard School, recently tested the site on a computer in his home studio. He was impressed by the site's level of cross-referencing. Curious about a link to a fiddler and mandolin player, Darol Anger, he was led to an Americana collection by a vocal group Mr. Bilous thought he knew well, Anonymous 4. "It was lovely to find out that they have a recording of American folk music -- and to discover that through the mandolin player's page? I don't know where else I'd go for that," Mr. Bilous said.

Building a system that can make such connections is difficult, in part because of inconsistencies in the data supplied by record labels. Classical Archives relies on a team of eight musicologists who vet every music file. "We want to provide a universal database for every recorded piece of classical music," says Nolan Gasser, artistic director of Classical Archives.

Mr. Gasser has been developing the sites's framework since joining the company seven years ago. A musicologist with a doctoral degree from Stanford University, Mr. Gasser is a composer whose works have been performed by groups such as the Memphis Symphony Orchestra. In the tech world, however, Mr. Gasser is best known as an architect of the Music Genome Project, which analyzed songs down to the detail of tempo, atmosphere and lyrical content. This project, which relied on human analysis, was used to power Pandora, an online music discovery service.

Classical Archives is still filling out its inventory. In another recent test, pianist Jonathan Biss started with a simple exercise -- he searched for himself. The 28-year-old musician performs about 100 times a year and has recorded four albums for EMI. But the most recent of these releases -- a rendition of Mozart's Piano Concertos Nos. 21 and 22, issued last fall -- wasn't on Classical Archives.

Mr. Gasser says Classical Archives hasn't yet received or fully processed some titles from its record label partners, a process he says should be complete by the site's official launch.

Mr. Schwob, who was raised in Switzerland and moved to the U.S. in 1973, made his money with inventions such as a piece of radio software that became standard in car stereos. A science patron who recently donated \$1 million to Stanford University's astrophysics department, he's the sole financial backer of Classical Archives -- a fact that helped convince at least one key record label to supply its catalog. "He's quite passionate about classical music, so that goes a long way for us," says Jim Selby, CEO of Naxos of America.

Classical Archives currently has about 10,000 paying members, most of them left over from the site's first iteration.

Mr. Schwob says the company needs a total of at least 30,000 members to become profitable. To hit that target he's is willing to risk his personal wealth "because I think it's a good cause," he says, "and I think I can make a lot of money if it's done right.

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