



**Clare Wiley** finds out how independent labels are continuing to find a niche in the saturated classical recording market, through smart branding and wide networks

In an age where classical music sales are experiencing a general decline, and in an economic period where establishing any business is a challenge, several entrepreneurs have defied the times by launching independent classical labels. Classical music now makes up only two per cent of recorded music sales in the US, where in the early 1960s the figure was 10 times that. Moreover, in a recent interview with *Gramophone*, Naxos founder Klaus Heymann speculated that while major labels like EMI or Deutsche Grammophon don't attract much label loyalty, the independent labels such as Hyperion and Harmonia Mundi do, thus presenting a clear area of competition for new independent firms. Heymann said that these labels 'stand for certain things, and have a well-

defined image'. Certainly then, this image or brand identity is the priority for these bold new labels.

The Steinway & Sons label officially launched on 1 September, with its first release, Jeffrey Biegel's *Bach on a Steinway*, debuting at number three on the Billboard chart. Eric Feidner, president of ArkivMusic, the Steinway subsidiary which controls the label, approached the American pianist. 'Based on the sales of my last CD they asked me to be the first Steinway artist to record for it,' explains Biegel. 'I was actually taken aback.' With each of the four releases per year being recorded on a Steinway by an artist from the manufacturer's Concert and Artist programme, the label has a distinct brand identity. 'It's a wonderful way to promote the





Steinway piano, by bringing the instrument out into the recording world so people can really enjoy its quality,' he asserts. 'A well-voiced Steinway is an instrument that can indeed sound like no other.'

Conversely, the image of Heresy Records, launched last month, has been largely determined by its founder Eric Fraad. 'As a series of cultural, economic, and technological transformations are changing the music industry, a lot of people would think that this would be a frightening time to begin building a record company,' he explains, 'but in fact I think these [factors] create an exciting time to do this.' Focusing mainly on early music, Fraad has been working on his Dublin-based firm for about two years, refining and polishing the label's identity. 'It's a reflection of my personality, taste, thoughts and observations about the world; all those things go into the creation of a brand,' he enthuses. 'With a name like Heresy, if you take it out of its older religious context, it's more about an unconventional and subversive approach. That underpins the notion of the identity of the label.'

Seven recordings are available already, and scheduled for future release are 17th-century works by the London-based Atalante ensemble, and a recording by the eX ensemble, focusing on Irish and Spanish music of the Renaissance. Fraad is adamant that the label's personality will run through the company, from CD packaging to the website. 'Heresy will be a "designer-driven" label, meaning that we care a tremendous amount about the visual identity, the visual expression, the marketing and the people we're working with.' Rather than singling out certain repertoire, Fraad wants Heresy to target a certain audience who 'care about design and know that we're thinking about the music in a different way'.

The team behind Newton Classics, which was officially launched in June, is adopting a more laissez-faire approach to identity. Founded by Theo Lap, who has previously worked with EMI and Deutsche Grammophon, Warner Classics and Harmonia Mundi, the Dutch-based group will release archived music, and has issued 32 recordings so far. 'The brand identity for Newton Classics is still in progress,' states Lap. 'It's a matter of using the internet, and advertising and retailing in the appropriate ways to get the brand across to the audience; just the normal thinking and hoping that the label will establish itself in the minds of the collectors.' Lap has plans to release new music in the next few years, but admits the company does not currently have the budget or personnel to produce live artists.

A standard decision each entrepreneur must make is that of repertoire selection; what will be the balance of control between the musicians and the label? If Biegel's Bach recording is anything to go by, Steinway will take a collaborative attitude. 'We discussed repertoire,' recalls Biegel. 'Originally they wanted me to consider doing different kinds of repertoire; I actually replied with the idea that I would like to make my personal stamp recording Bach, who did not write for the piano. I always wondered what he would have done if he had a Steinway.'

As part of his designer-driven philosophy, Fraad plans to have a far greater degree of control. 'Rather than using a word like "artist-driven" we will work with the ensembles,' he emphasises. 'What I can offer is the creation of a unique identity for them. Each project I look at, I look at it more like a show. I try to find a narrative within it. I try to find something that can be built and expressed so there's a uniqueness about it.' Rather than determining repertoire, Heresy will "design" and develop the musicians'

image. He wants to be involved with each recording from the licensing period, through to the polished final disc. 'I'm not interested in one-offs,' Fraad says. 'I'm interested in building a long-term relationship.'

For Newton Classics, balancing control with the musicians is obviously not an issue, but problems can arise when licensing the music. Sourcing its recordings from the vaults of the major record labels, the company plans to release recordings of Gérard Souzay, Jorge Bolet, Alicia de Larrocha and Walter Gieseking, among others. 'Some are very happy to work with us,' explains Lap. 'With some it's a bit more difficult. Some record companies find it a little uncomfortable to license to third parties.'

The internet is absolutely crucial for these labels; for both marketing and sales. Steinway releases will be sold on the ArkivMusic website, iTunes and Amazon, with worldwide distribution provided by Naxos, through its website and online musical library.

Newton is using its own website for communication, and specialist web stores to sell CDs and offer free sample downloads. 'We're looking at the possibility of partnering with other websites as well,' Lap reveals, 'websites that draw an audience of the same calibre and with the same interests as the ones we're targeting.' The label's own site also hosts PDFs with additional information for each disc, for example sung texts.

While Fraad believes that social networking can be 'cynical' because it allows anyone and everyone to 'create art,' he admits that it's a powerful tool. 'Of course I want to use it as much as possible,' he says. 'But I'd like to position it in a different way. I'm very focused on non-traditional marketing tactics and strategies. The normative way of advertising is so expensive; it makes it imperative that a small independent record company finds interesting ways to reach the audiences that might purchase their stuff.'

Newton Classics, whose funding was provided privately, was able to cut costs in certain ways, including the PDF documents and by issuing smaller quantities of discs. Heresy's end goal is to be self-funded through the sale of its records. 'Sometimes throwing amounts of money at things doesn't make it all that much better,' observes Fraad. 'When you don't have a lot of money you have to come up with interesting ways of doing things.'

Through networking, Newton Classics has developed around 25 firms to distribute records in 40 countries. Lap notes, however, that 80 to 90 per cent of the company's sales are derived from collectors in Japan, the US, the UK, Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

Balancing a combination of factors including brand identity, use of the internet and distribution is key. Lap adds another quality to the mix: experience. 'I've had a long relationship with people who either license the repertoire to me or who are selling the repertoire,' he says. 'On both sides it's a question of trust and knowledge of each other and how you work. I don't think [setting up a label] is something you can do easily if you are 27 or 28 and have very little experience in this area. Without a network, you can't do this - it's absolutely impossible.' ■

Main picture:  
DeLirium, one of the  
first signings by  
Heresy Records

Above left: pianist  
Jeffrey Biegel

Above right: Newton  
Classics' Theo Lap

[www.newtonclassics.com](http://www.newtonclassics.com)

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<http://heresyrecords.com>

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