

Deutsche Grammophon Over A Century Old

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CLOCKING IN at older than a century, Deutsche Grammophon is one of recorded music's enduring brands, so venerable that in 1877 its German founder Emile Berliner was the second or third individual to capture and play back sound. (The first, a Frenchman named Charles Cros, actually beat Berliner and Thomas Edison by about six months with a similar invention, but was not commercially minded and failed to patent the invention. Meanwhile, Berliner and Edison each insisted they were first.)

In late 2009, DG commemorated its 111th anniversary, releasing a barrage of products, including everything from two "Collector's Edition" boxed sets of 55 and 56 CDs, respectively (adding up to 111, of course) for completists to a coffee-table book, *Deutsche Grammophon: State of the Art: 1898 - Present. Celebrating Over a Century of Musical Excellence*. For classical fans who prefer to be entertained visually, there's also a DVD boxed-set containing 13 discs.

DG and its familiar yellow logo are synonymous with quality classical music, and its rich archives no doubt could be plundered for years ahead to repackage an infinite number of collections. After all, we're talking about recordings that date back to the beginning of recorded sound.

Deutsche Grammophon – State of the Art (book, Rizzoli)
111 Classic Tracks (promotional USB, 028947781684 / Universal Music Group)
111 More Classic Tracks (six CDs, 002894779235 / Universal Music Group)

While neither massive music set was made available to us for this article, DG and the Universal Music Group, which now oversees the label, provided the initial primer collection *111 Classic Tracks* set on a promotional USB stick (not available to the public), containing all the music (albeit MP3s) found on the six CDs, which still can be purchased. We also received another 111 tracks on Volume 2's six-CD collection (aptly titled *111 More Classic Tracks*) released in 2010, carrying the extremely reasonable list retail price of \$24.99).

The six-CD collections are various artist compilations, whereas the *Collector's Editions* contain complete artist-specific albums that can also be purchased individually. Both the boxed sets and smaller collections were originally billed as limited editions that "wiped off shop shelves within a few weeks of release," according to DG. So due to popular demand, all four collections, as of this writing, are back in circulation in CD form. The two volumes each of *Collector's Edition* (list price: \$169.99) and *111 Classic Tracks* are also available for download as LossLess (CD-quality) files from Deutsche Grammophon's online web shop, <http://www.dgwebshop.com>, as well as from iTunes. A separate website, <http://www.dg-111.com/>, tells the label story in cyberspace.

The *111 Classic Tracks Vol. 2* CD cover art of a red background with three ones painted in yellow (the first volume reverses the colors) cleverly recalls the Beatles' *1* compilation from 2000, demonstrating that the classical world's paying attention to the marketing ploys of the popular sector.

According to the press materials, DG's "philosophy has always been the greatest recordings by the greatest artists in the world" – something clearly borne out by the formidable catalog. The talent roster runs from Caruso and Richard Strauss at the beginnings of recording history to recent arrivals Alice Sara Ott and Yuja Wang. New music is represented by the likes of Steve Reich. Opera staples too: Pavarotti sings Verdi, and of course, a version of "Carmen" are present.

State of the Art – Rizzoli's handsomely packaged coffee table book, which lists for \$65 – traces recording back to the days of Berliner, who established the company in 1898 in Germany even though he had already emigrated to the U.S. in 1870. Eight years later he invented and patented his first disc and player, and used American-made hydraulic presses to produce the shellac discs for the Gramophone Company, whose discs became more popular than Edison's cylinders (first format war!), resulting in an industry standard. Gramophone's manufacturing ingenuity, coupled with well-tooled, commercial-minded English and American partners, resulted in the first doubled-sided discs in 1907.

Like Berliner, Edison also attempted to lock up talent; they unwittingly became the first entertainment practitioners of vertical integration (i.e., single company owns both audio playback mechanical device and content). Sony would buy its way into Hollywood and the American music business in the late 1980s.

The book does a good job chronicling the evolution of the company through every recording technology development along the way (i.e., 78s to LPs to cassettes to CDs), and how turn-of-the-century talent like Caruso became hot properties among early industry players on both sides of the Atlantic. Berliner hired American Fred Gaisberg to be an in-house producer; Gaisberg personally financed Caruso's productions.

World War I hostilities had a negative impact on Deutsche Grammophon because of its German roots, and raw materials became scarce; history was repeated less than three decades later. Details abound regarding record specifications, their materials composition and how they evolved over the years.

Vintage posters, advertisements and artist photographs illustrate the book's text throughout, and include such revelatory items as a copy of the formal order from the Gestapo demanding the confiscation of recordings made by Jewish artists and a photograph of a company factory in Hanover, Germany lying in rubble after an Allied bombing.

Post-WWII, Deutsche Grammophon settled into what it did best: Aggregator of the finest repertoires, composers, conductors, soloists and orchestras. Interviews and contributions from the artists, historians, producers, engineers and employees who have played a vital role in the label's success represent about 80% of the content of the 224-page book, which includes two sampler CDs of label recordings. Considering the company's rich history that harks back to long-bygone eras, oddly none of the 38 tracks date earlier than 1961.

That's not the case with Volumes 1 and 2 of the 111-track sets. A 1911 performance in St. Petersburg of Mussorgsky's "Proshchay, moy syn/Boris's Death" by Feodor Chaliapin & Orchestra (found on *111 More Classic Tracks*) is the earliest recording of what was made available to TAV, and sounds a bit hissy, which

could be expected no matter how much state-of-art restoration might have been applied.

The recordings made available are top heavy with selections from the past few decades; the exceptions also being tracks recorded originally in 1921, 1927, 1928, 1930 and 1934. By the way, the USB's music sounded way better coming through my Teac all-in-one unit – which I originally bought to turn my vinyl into digital files but I still haven't figured out to use the darn thing – than through my MacBook.

To the classical music neophyte, the *Classic Tracks* collections are a treasure trove, providing staples of all the major composers; well-known names such as Beethoven, Mozart, Debussy, Chopin, Bach, Dvorak, Strauss, Schubert, Ravel, et. al. show up track after track. The history of music that stands against time can be certainly intimidating to the uninitiated. After all, the American public education system dropped music appreciation long ago. I have fond mid-1960s memories of periodically being in my grade-school auditorium watching Leonard Bernstein's "Young People's Concert" series. Junior philistines who weren't so enriched culturally might still recognize snippets like Brahms's "Hungarian Dance" from a classic Bugs Bunny cartoon.

Where the DG primers fall short is providing some sort of context of how and why these collections were assembled, besides the arbitrary anniversary. The *More Classic Tracks* booklet offers details of composers, performers, pieces, years and places, but not much more in terms of liner notes, which probably says more about the releases' relatively low cost. A musicologist's essay could have helped putting it all in perspective. Well, maybe that's the book's purpose.

Also disconcerting is seemingly haphazard track order, as it switches genres (opera to symphony) and decades with no apparent rhyme or reason. It took a while for me to figure out that each track is listed alphabetically by the featured soloist/performer's name (as opposed to composer). It seems to me that a better approach might have been a grouping by style of music, or influences (i.e., how one thing led to the next).

There's also the abridged, slice-and-dice nature to the proceedings that the purist might find frustrating. Does a 2:01 taste really do justice to Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker Suite"? (In any case, Vol. 1 offers the "Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy" as played by the Berliner Philharmoniker and conducted by Ferdinand Leitner in 1959 in Berlin.)

More Classic Tracks also offers rock star Sting stretching beyond his comfort zone, singing a John Lowland (1563-1626) composition, "Fine Knacks for Ladies." And John Denver's "Annie's Song" gets a classical treatment, courtesy of contemporary crossover flautist James Galway, leading the London Symphony Orchestra.

It begs the question whether one label alone can really present the world's greatest music in one place? Do consumers really shop buy by label, or is it the music contained within that dictates whether an album is purchased?

To the connoisseur, no doubt classical experts can suggest better performances and recordings from other labels, but DG is certainly not a bad catalog to try to aggregate in one huge helping. After all, the mere appearance of the DG logo conveys an aesthete that promises and delivers quality more often than not.