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# These 3 String Players Founded Their Own Labels to Support Creative Freedom

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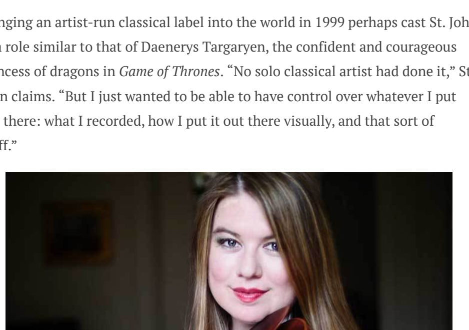
By Jeff Kaliss | From the January-February 2021 issue of *Strings* magazine

When Lara St. John sought a moniker for her own record label in 1999, she chose Ancalagon, to memorialize her recently deceased pet iguana, whose name in turn had been taken from a formidable creature in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Silmarillion*. Her love for reptiles harkened back to her upbringing as a violin prodigy in Ontario, Canada, where her mother rewarded her with a plastic dinosaur every time she topped a competition. "[The dinosaurs] made me practice," she recounts by phone from her current home in New York City.

Bringing an artist-run classical label into the world in 1999 perhaps cast St. John in a role similar to that of Daenerys Targaryen, the confident and courageous princess of dragons in *Game of Thrones*. "No solo classical artist had done it," St. John claims. "But I just wanted to be able to have control over whatever I put out there: what I recorded, how I put it out there visually, and that sort of stuff."



*Lara St. John, photo: Adrienne Lloyd*

She'd had "some less-than-ideal experiences with a few labels," several of which went out of business. With Ancalagon, St. John was free to employ album designs that might have caused more conservative labels to balk. Her performance style was informed by the music she'd picked up living and touring in Eastern Europe in her teens, and Ancalagon's catalog reflects her eclectic tastes, even including a couple of polka albums (*Polkastra: 'I Do,' The Wedding Album* and *Apolkalypse Now*). "A major label would have probably kicked me out of the office after the word 'polka,'" she chuckles.

But St. John's label also continued to embrace her classical training. She recorded Schubert songs and small ensemble pieces; partnered with her older brother, violist and violinist Scott St. John, and the Knights for an album of Mozart (winner of the 2011 Juno Award for Best Classical Album, Large Ensemble); and most recently collaborated with pianist Matt Herskowitz on *Key of A: Beethoven Sonata No. 9 & the Franck Sonata*—with a Kreisler "encore."

Speaking from his home in Montreal, Canada, Matt Haimovitz readies himself for a chilly afternoon of kid-friendly soccer with daughters Maya and Nessa while preparing for the release of *Mon Ami, Mon Amour*, a tribute to his restored 1710 Goffriller cello. It's a "concept" album, a bouquet of French music, and the latest release on Oxingale, the label founded 20 years ago by Haimovitz and Luna Pearl Woolf, his composer/producer wife.

Oxingale came to life "around the end of my exclusive contract with Deutsche Grammophon, with whom I'd been recording for a dozen years," says the cellist. He'd done a series of solo recordings of contemporary European works for the venerable label, but "they didn't know what to do with them, in terms of marketing," and they hadn't afforded Haimovitz enough interchange with the living composers, which is vital to him.

Equally important, and rare on major labels, is a spirit of lightheartedness, reflected in his label's portmanteau name. It derives from a legendary remark by writer and philosopher Voltaire at a cello concert, where the 18th-century wise guy is said to have told cellist Jean-Louis Duport, "Sir, you will make me believe in miracles, for I see that you can turn an ox into a nightingale!"

Haimovitz and Woolf's creation found a model in artist-run, singer-songwriter labels, and followed their example of actively supporting releases with touring. After Oxingale's debut with a set of Bach cello suites in 2000, the cellist "went on the road and played in coffee houses and rock clubs and jazz clubs, very much inspired by the indie-music scene."

There was pushback from managers and other music-biz stalwarts. "They said that I was 'bringing down the brand' and diminishing the quality of the music. But it actually had the opposite effect." Oxingale found itself quite able to sell albums and attract new and younger fans, while continuing to defy convention. In 2011, the label garnered a Grammy nomination for Best Classical Crossover Album for *Meeting of the Spirits*, a recording made with Uccello, Haimovitz's cello ensemble. Recently, Oxingale has been nominated for a 2021 Grammy for *Luna Pearl Woolf: Fire and Flood*, which also features Haimovitz.

*Matt Haimovitz, photo: Steph Mackinnon*

Not binding himself as an artist to his own label exclusively, the cellist has also recorded several tracks with singers for the Dutch-based Pentatone label. Encouraged by Lisa Delan, one of the participating sopranos, Oxingale formed a partnership with Pentatone, in which, as Haimovitz puts it, "we've offered them a fresh perspective on the repertoire, and a big financial burden has been removed from us," including the basics of packaging, marketing, and international distribution.

"About 15 years ago, when I started this label primarily as a hobby, I think it was thanks to an entrepreneurial gene that I'd somehow had since I was a child," muses Matthew Trusler. He was raised in London and sounds like it, but he's speaking from Paris, where he can take a temporary break, with daughters Lily and Lisa, from the now more-than-full-time task of running Orchid Classics, founded in 2005 and named by Trusler's sister.

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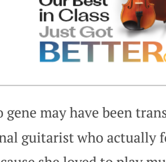


That get-up-and-go gene may have been transmitted from his mother, Anthea Gifford, a professional guitarist who actually formed her own short-lived record label. "She did it because she loved to play music and wanted to bring projects together for all of her best friends," says her son. Similarly, Trusler, a graduate of Curtis and an acclaimed recital and chamber violinist, started Orchid "primarily as a hobby, but not to make records for myself. Now, maybe part of me felt that other labels didn't understand projects the way I wished they would, but it wasn't about that, either. I wanted to create a business I could involve others in."

By the same token, "I didn't set out to be a violin-only or strictly a chamber music label," Trusler notes. "Each time a project came, I just thought: Is this really good? Do I think the artist has something to say? We had a choir, and suddenly it's a piano, or a singer, or a whole bunch of kids' albums. And I love bringing together different disciplines: paintings on covers, spoken word, poems, all sorts."

Early on, Orchid developed an appealing reputation for its relations with artists, sourced from Trusler's experience as a performer. "One thing I can do is speak the language of musicians," he says. "But if the artist asks if I think something makes commercial sense, I try to discourage that, because that road never actually leads to commercial success."

The success of Orchid blossomed, as did the label's diversity, and it drew the attention of Venezuelan pianist Gabriela Montero. "She'd recorded only for major labels, but she had her own political piece for orchestra and piano, *Ex Patria*," says Trusler, "and she just wasn't willing to have that messed with." Montero's Orchid recording won a Latin Grammy Award in 2015.

The following year, "it felt like the right time for me to take over the managing role," says Trusler. "The idea was I'd still play concerts, but a year after that I sat down with my agent, and we both said, there's no need to do this. You can't really [concertize] a bit; you've got to do that completely. And it's the same with the business. I don't really believe in multitasking that way." With the advice and support of his manager, he decided to stop recording and performing as a violinist.

*Matthew Trussler*

Trusler, who'd doodled company logos as a child, found himself reading hundreds of books about business and carefully observing his manager in practice and finding that he thoroughly enjoyed the process. "Now I'm more disciplined and dedicated than I was as a violinist," he claims. "I always found reading books about composers and studying scores a bit of a chore, actually."

Aside from critical acclaim for its 136 albums (the smaller catalogues of Ancalagon and Oxingale have been similarly praised), Orchid has spawned a charity, the Lenny Trusler Children's Foundation, named for the child whom Trusler and his ex-wife lost to a rare kidney disease. Several Orchid albums of fairy tales, brought to life by the voices of such actors as Kenneth Branagh and Simon Pegg, earn revenue for the foundation.

Although Trusler is no longer touring, Haimovitz and St. John (once they're back on the road) will depend on their labels to provide recordings and merchandise that can be sold and signed at meet-and-greets. But their labels have had to recognize changes in the media of distribution.

"I think it was in 2005 that iTunes said, 'Hi, we're iTunes, and we want to have your Bach Concerto album,'" relates St. John. "I guess they thought it would be a really good seller, and it was. It ended up at #1 on 'classical' for months! In the beginning, iTunes was really into the little guy. They became a great equalizer."

"We came in at a time when [the music industry] had started to implode," adds Haimovitz. "And then it just started to evolve, with iTunes, iPods, downloading, and later streaming and livestreaming. And you could do your own playlist and through social media you could share tracks and talk about them. Pentatone is really the one with the relationship to the [new] distributors, like Apple Music, Spotify, and, to a lesser degree, Amazon. In classical music, we're a little behind the other genres, but now we're talking about even releasing something digitally and not on CD."

"The streaming part of the business makes up about half of our revenue now," affirms Trusler. "But that means half of our revenue comes from people actually buying CDs, because they still like something physical."

St. John, Haimovitz, and Trusler all insist that they're providing alternatives to, but not competing with, bigger, established labels. Haimovitz's Oxingale, of course, has developed a symbiotic relationship with Pentatone—a partnership that helped propel Pentatone to acclaim as *Gramophone*'s Label of the Year in 2019.

Trusler's output on Orchid rivals that of many of his antecedents. "There are so many labels doing wonderful stuff," he says. "But artists enjoy recording for us and often come back and do many things with us." For string players in particular, "repertoire is a big deal, and if you take that to many other labels, it's pretty limited."

And the future? First, they all must handle the disruptive forces of the present, though not all are affected in the same way. Given the scope of his operation, it makes sense that Trusler views the recording industry as "one part of the music business that has remained isolated from the chaos" of the COVID-19 pandemic. "I have more time on the phone with artists," he reports, "and every day there's a new person needing an outlet for their creativity." Orchid expects to release two dozen albums throughout 2021.

Though more artists, largely unable to perform in public, are undoubtedly seeking out recording projects to fill this time, the nature of collaboration is undergoing a shift, changing the way these projects develop. "This is a very painful moment for the performing arts, because there's no more chemistry, no more back-and-forth," insists Haimovitz, "though we've always had that with Pentatone, all the way."

And then, of course, smaller labels without deeper-pocketed collaborators have to fund each project themselves. "I have some commissions, a violin concerto, and an orchestration of the John Corigliano Violin Sonata that I'd like to record," shares St. John. "But with the pandemic, my income has gone down the drain, so is this the time for me to spend that much?" Thankfully, the bleak year of 2020 ended on a bright note for St. John, as she was awarded the Order of Canada by her native country. Canada, she says, is much like a label run by a musician: it goes out of its way to support the expression of talent.

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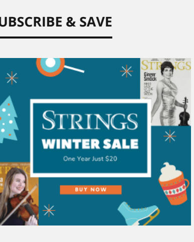


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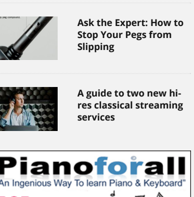
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