

COMPOSERS RECORDINGS, INC.

by

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The record business is geared to quick sales and the ruthless deletion of slow moving items. This means it is virtually impossible for a conventional record company, no matter how virtuous, to release music of new composers and performers. Even when production costs are prepaid, such companies may find it impossible to consider a record that does not promise a certain rate of sales.

In 1954 three hopeful musicians set up a new record company in opposition to the system. The founders were Otto Luening and the late Douglas Moore, both of Columbia University, and Oliver Daniel, who now heads BMI's Serious Music Division. The company was Composers Recordings, Inc. (CRI) which has become the largest and now the oldest record company dealing exclusively in contemporary music.

The basic difference between CRI and a conventional record company is that while the latter selects each catalogue item because the producers think it will sell, CRI chooses its selections simply because the directors think the music is worth recording. CRI's mechanism is a revolving (and anonymous) Editorial Committee, which must approve every score before it is accepted.

To make a go of such an idealistic operation, CRI has had to solicit funds from outside sources for every production. Its current list of regular supporters includes the American Composers Alliance, the National Institute/American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music, Inc., and the Naumburg Foundation--each of which arranges with CRI to record and release music of two or more award-winning composers each year--plus the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University, and the Contemporary Music Society, which also make possible specific projects from time to time. In the past two years,

moreover, fifteen colleges and universities have assisted in the release of music by composers on their staffs, apparently having recognized that recording is a form of publication. Some composers have also been able to raise funds independently for production of their own music.

With such backing CRI has been able to schedule two releases per month for the past three years. Most albums contain music by two, three or four composers. The current catalogue lists more than 210 albums, including music by almost 400 composers, and provides a panorama of modern American music from the 1920's to the present. It is CRI policy to keep every record available at all times, thus making itself an archive as well as a prime source of new material.

Most new CRI recording projects are predictably of what used to be called "chamber music" proportions. While this still means string quartets and solo sonatas, it also means music for less predictable combinations, many of which, under the ministrations of ingenious composers, sound almost as rich as full orchestras.

Many of CRI's U.S. recordings are performed by members of contemporary music performing groups from a number of colleges. These musicians are in the forefront of today's performers, often able to deliver multiple tones on wind instruments, bass clef "pedal tones" on the flute, a "repertory" of vibratos, microtones and so forth with scarcely credible ease and reliability. They are literally playing music that would have been considered impossible a decade ago. Since so many of them believe in new music, or at least are challenged by it, CRI is able to employ some of the world's finest musicians for union scale. Most of the recordings are made soon after the works have been mellowed by public performance.

When CRI finds itself engaged in a recording of orchestral music, it is usually placed in the anomalous position of recording American works with foreign orchestras. The American Federation of Musicians' uniform recording scale, which charges the same wage for member musicians in all parts of its

jurisdiction, has made it virtually impossible for CRI (or almost any other U.S. label) to make orchestral recordings in this country.

Although adequate funds are currently available for production, no philanthropist has seen fit to subsidize the selling of records. Until recently therefore, the steady appearance of new records, publicized by reviews and air plays on educational and FM radio stations has been the most effective form of promotion that could be afforded. Limited though it has been, this has resulted in a steady increase of sales, totaling more than 100 per cent increase in five years.

There is, nevertheless, a constant and apparently unbeatable distribution problem. In a business dominated by rack sales and the violently competitive methods of popular music, it is virtually impossible for a company with no big brother in the rock music world or its own national distribution system to make efficient use of ordinary distributors. By unpleasant experience, CRI has learned that distributors are often willing to accept its records. But when it comes time to pay the bills--rarely earlier than 60 or even 120 days later--many distributors simply return the records they have not sold. Slow-moving products do not interest them. CRI is expanding its merchandising program with a national sales representative and increased direct sales to retailers.

But even when the distributors manage to get CRI releases into the stores, it is often hard for the public to find the ones it wants. I have personally been told by clerks in important New York retail shops that the record I wanted was not in stock (under duress, they have later found it) and even that CRI was "out of business." Even stores that order all new releases are less than interested in reordering them when they sell out.

As a result of such discouraging experiences, CRI has intensified its efforts at two additional selling programs: a frontal attack on the academic community and a direct mail program which is still in the planning stages. To interest schools and libraries, CRI

gives them a 50 per cent price advantage. In such cases a standing order (subscription) may be arranged at the same price. Early in 1973 an Antioch student on his Work Period was employed (under outside sponsorship) to visit campuses on the Eastern Seaboard. His mission was to make sure libraries, music departments, bookstores, and radio stations are aware of the CRI catalogue. In addition, any CRI recording may also be purchased in person or by mail from its offices at 170 West 74th St., New York, N.Y. 10023. The retail price is \$5.95.

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