

DOWNLOADING EARLY MUSIC ONLINE

Trying to find the early music you want online is a perilous undertaking filled with lacunae, cul-de-sacs, and wild goose chases—but also lots of potential

By Daniel Felsenfeld

If you read ArtsJournal.com, *The New York Times*, *Billboard*, or any newsy, trade magazine geared towards various arts issues, you're probably all too aware of the ongoing debate over the destruction wreaked by the illegal downloading of music. Certain online music sources – the ill-fated, highly-criticized Napster among them – are rectifying the situation, creating a place where, for a price, individual songs can be downloaded. From these sites, CDs can be burned and iPods (portable hard drives that enable you to carry around 10,000 songs in your back pocket) fully stocked; it seems that everyone is happy: downloading is no longer theft, but business. It was, of course, only a matter of time before some intelligent soul figured out how to charge for it.

If you are a fan of Britney, boy bands, or Sting, downloading – legal or otherwise – is a simple, even (sometimes) cost-effective process. But where does that leave other listeners? Can an

opera fan download any Maria Callas track he or she desires? Can enthusiasts of Wolfgang Rihm or Karlheinz Stockhausen pay a small fee and access tracks off limited pressing CDs otherwise found

only in German record stores? Can a lover of the Tallis Scholars burn, from the comfort of his or her living room, *Spem in Alium* onto a

CD, or perhaps, in order to make an intelligent comparison, even burn several versions of Tallis's motet by different performers?

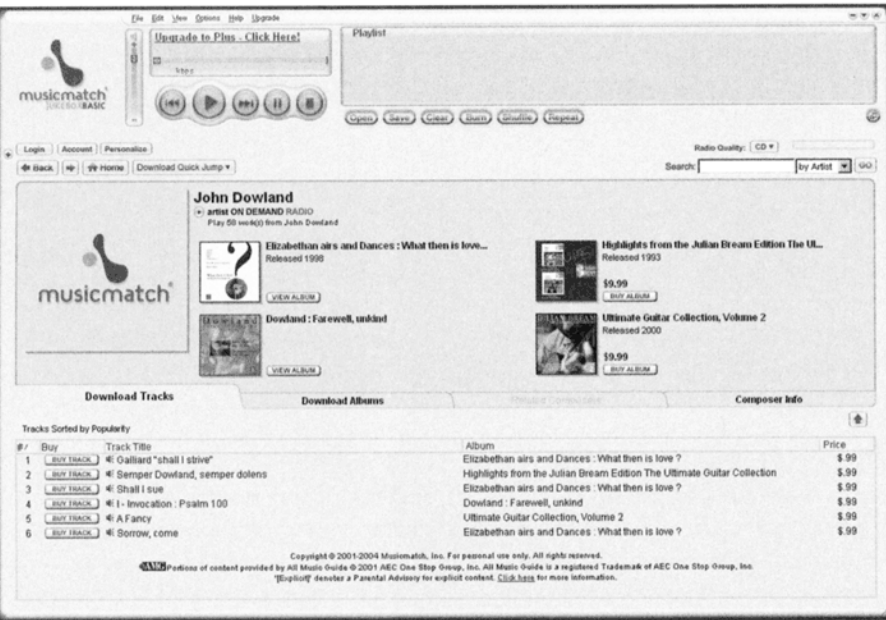
The short answer: not really, not yet.

Pop music, even by the most sublime and gifted artists, is streamlined for the contemporary age and always has been; concert music, being largely of the past, never imagined such advances – it was built for a different world than this. And while many contemporary composers are incredibly tech savvy, most of their listeners (actual or potential) are not. Also, where liner notes, texts, and packaging might mean little to the avid pop music fan, they tend to matter more to us, especially with words and translations as well as historical background information so critical to understanding music of eras long since passed, in languages we do not speak.

Digital odyssey

The remastering craze of the late 1980s, when the world made its move from vinyl to digital, is partially responsible for the trouble at the moment. Companies interested in reselling their entire back catalogs – even though they were well aware that the technology, wherein no quality was lost between transfers, might cause this sort of fracas down the line – were focused more on the then-current fiscal gain than on the potential ill it might well cause future generations. This is nowhere more true than for concert music. Ours is a world of re-issues of re-issues, multiple recordings, compilations, and difficult decisions between them all, especially for enthusiastic neophytes. The way concert music is downloaded today does nobody any favors – yet. Finding anything not up-to-the-minute on the Internet can be a frustrating dark odyssey: there are myriad sites, of





be obtained. This is by no means a comprehensive list of sites, but these are the most prevalent and discussed at the moment. There are actually countless others, and more seem to emerge to suit the growing demand.

Some, like Easy Music Download, offer a flat fee for unlimited downloads. This squares things legally but seems potentially a little questionable on the moral level: if you pay \$21.95 for a year (\$29.95 for two) and are thereby entitled to reap to your heart's content, it is very likely that artists aren't getting their deserved kickbacks, which is the very issue on which the debates over downloading hinge. On the opposite extreme, an interesting site called Magnatune – atop whose homepage are emblazoned the words “we are not evil” – asks for a donation to download an entire album, reminding all who visit that half of what they give goes directly to the artist and to please be generous. Their roster is small and fascinating, full of lesser known names who nonetheless seem of great interest – names like Dufay Collective, English Concert, Ensemble Sreteniye, James Edwards, Jacob Heringman, Joglearesa, Kyiv Chamber Choir, Lara St. John, New York Consort of Viols, Oberlin Consort of Viols, Orinda, and Paul Berget, among others. If you are willing to take a chance for cheap, you can support the arts from the comfort of your study.

But overall, with the exception of the three records by the made-for-TV Mediaeval Baebes and some other well-promoted groups, the supply of early music online is very spotty. eMusic, for example, had only one hit for the list entered, a Josquin compilation called *Renaissance Greats* on the Amon Ra label, and dribbles of historical performances from the Baroque and Classical periods. There was a short explanatory note on the site about why more was not available. It backhandedly blamed the artists and labels for not releasing their music in this format, but a search for Britney Spears, whose music is readily available

Musicmatch Jukebox Plus for around \$20.

Once software has been downloaded, each site has a different way of handling both the managing and the downloading of the music. (All those

“I think legal digital downloading will be a real market force as a way to consume music. Convenience, sound quality, and the ability to choose only the tracks you want make this a very appealing format.” – Rebecca Davis, Naxos manager of publicity and promotions

MP3-format selections, once on your personal computer, must be properly catalogued and sifted if you want to listen to or load them onto a portable device.) Musicmatch and iTunes are the most popular sites, perhaps due both to their compatibility with iPods and other available portable MP3 devices and to their one-stop-shopping approach; each is a place where music can be downloaded, organized, burned to a CD, put through your stereo speakers, or even edited. But at other sites, like Listen.com (a.k.a. Rhapsody), eMusic, Napster (gone legal), Magnatune, BuyMusic.com, Easy Music Download – even, now, Wal-Mart – music can also

differing quality, to navigate; and, for the most part, few sites really – at least as of this writing – have a handle on how to make concert music available.

One way to evaluate this vast landscape was to use a control group approach. On several sites, I entered the names Lassus (or Lasso), Monteverdi, Josquin, Gesualdo, Tallis Scholars, Hilliard Ensemble, and Mediaeval Baebes in order to gather a wide swathe of pre-Baroque performers and composers. I also sought recordings of more standard Baroque and Classical repertoire by both Roger Norrington and John Eliot Gardiner. The reason for the mix of composers and performers is that, almost always when searching for a particular composer, it is impossible to find a specific performance; inversely, when a compilation disc called *English and Italian Renaissance Madrigals* was available, there was no documentation about which piece was written by whom. This was true, for the most part, across the entire spectrum of sites surveyed.

Most sites have their own software, which also needs to be downloaded, so unless you are blessed with limitless patience, attempting anything on a dial-up connection is essentially fruitless. Very few charge you for the software itself, except in the case of Musicmatch, which makes available basic player software at no cost, but also offers a cleaner, quicker, and more souped-up

everywhere else, also came up short. Perhaps eMusic is expanding, but until that happens, it is probably not worth the time.

At Listen.com (né Rhapsody), it was also "slim pickins," with a few tracks by Josquin or Lassus available, and no discernable historical performances of later material.

Musicmatch, the PC equivalent of iTunes, Apple's music managing software, was an efficient and excellent place to download songs at 99 cents apiece. They offer 30-second samples of a fairly extensive collection and, if you're lucky, amazingly detailed information about composers, works, and performing ensembles (even complete discographies in some cases). Their newest format is divided up into sections. Users can specifically access Medieval music (which boasts only the categories Hildegard of Bingen, Gregorian Chant, Alfonso X, and Ciconia) or Renaissance works (a healthy selection, ranging from expected names like Josquin and Lassus to the more obscure Verdelot and Cabezon). Though Musicmatch had a number of "historical performance" recordings of later material, it was not easy to find

them, because conducting a search by performer, rather than composer, was somewhat hit or miss. One interesting feature they offered, for \$59.95 per year, was a large selection of early music available through on-demand radio, a sort of self-programmed Internet radio station. Here you can access 37 tracks by Monteverdi, 17 by Josquin, and the 24 by the Baebes.

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iTunes was a little more accommodating, offering most of the same features for organization, a beautiful, easy layout, and, like Musicmatch, a way to fashion playlists for either computer or portable. The two programs are basically the same, but iTunes is a good deal friendlier, especially if you are less than computer savvy and find burning a CD or transferring a track to an iPod a daunting task; iTunes is available for both Mac and PC platforms. Its offerings, though still rather slim, were a lit-

tle more robust than those found at Musicmatch. Aside from the compulsory Baebes, they had an album by the Hilliard Ensemble and a generous supply of records by Roger Norrington and John Eliot Gardiner; if historical performance of Classical or Baroque repertoire is your interest, this is as good a place as any to find music ready for cybershipping.

Napster, once so controversial, offered, in their on-the-up-and-up, post-litigation phase, decidedly little aside from the Baebes and a smattering of Norrington and Gardiner. Not the site to visit – though, like all of these outlets, no doubt they are doing what they can to be comprehensive.

Easy Music Download was probably the most extensive, with much in the way of Lassus, Monteverdi, and Josquin, and plenty of historical performances of later composers, all listed in the clearest, most accessible fashion of any of these sites. While this site was possibly the best for many users, someone has to be getting hurt by its flat fee arrangement.

Bottom line: either iTunes or Musicmatch is the best place to look and will probably remain so for some

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Dufay Collective: medieval dance music.

Magnatune: A Different Approach to Downloading Early Music

Magnatune is an Internet record label. You can listen to their albums while you do other work. You can also buy the music online, determining the price you want to pay, and musicians get half of the purchase price.

John Buckman, a Renaissance lute player, founded Magnatune with his wife Jan Hanford, a harpsichordist. Classical music, which at Magnatune mainly means the Medieval to Baroque periods, accounts for over a third of all sales and has the most artists and albums of any genre at the site.

The classical repertoire at Magnatune is oriented toward unusual repertoire, which wouldn't be economically feasible in today's classical music industry. For example, you'll find the harpsichord works of Chambonnières, vihuelas from Luis de Milán's *El Maestro*, Demarzi's 6 Sonatas for cittern or kitara, as well as Briddes Rounne performing 13th-century Medieval English songs. Magnatune also helps release the best of the no-longer-available works from the past, such as Jacob Heringman and Catherine King's award-winning lute songs of both Mudarra and Milán, previously released on ASV but no longer in print.

Buckman says he founded Magnatune when "I realized that the classical CD business is no longer relevant to the Big Music Industry. Record stores, distributors, and talented musicians are all being told to abandon this obsolete art form, which I happen to love. Unless a new business model is created to support classical music, I fear for its future. Someone has to try, so why not me?"

Buckman says that while only 12% of the site's visitors come for classical music, it is nonetheless responsible for 34% of his sales. He believes this is because everyone is open to listening to classical to see if they might like it (in the comfortable environment of their home), a crossover phenomena which isn't possible for most other music genres.

In the future, Buckman would like to release recordings of the best orchestra performances in the world and is currently working with the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra to release 20 years of their performance recordings.



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A screen shot from iTunes showing the listing for recordings by Roger Norrington.

time. If one is pressed to choose between the two for ease, appearance, and availability of material, the former seems far superior.

A new technology

An article of this sort is bound, even by the time it reaches the printing press, to become obsolete, since the only thing that moves more quickly and decisively than the free market is technological innovation. But praise goes to the Naxos record label, perhaps the most progressive we have in concert music, for understanding the demands not only of consumers but also of listeners: a gratifying discovery made during this mostly-fruitless searching is that Naxos seemed to be the most active early music label to make use of the Internet, thereby offering more music at a reasonable price to more people, which genuinely seems to be its aim. At this writing, Naxos has negotiated with iTunes, Rhapsody, Musicmatch, and Napster to make available its entire extraordinarily comprehensive catalog. And where you might be able to download a single track for around a dollar,

you can download an entire record for the going retail price, which saves you the trouble of overpaying should you want an entire album. Naxos's liner notes are already available, at no charge, on their easy-to-navigate Web site. Everybody wins.

"Although the physical CD is by no means a dinosaur," says Rebecca Davis, who is Naxos's manager of publicity and promotions, "as more people get used to this new technology, I think legal digital downloading will be a real market force as a way to consume music. Convenience, sound quality, and the ability to choose only the tracks you want make this a very appealing format." Naxos is, of course, not the only label taking advantage of this method, but they do seem to be the most aggressive and risk-taking. "This is definitely a new business segment that labels will develop over the next years," says Jim Selby, Naxos's president. "Most of these vendors have not been in the music retail business, so they have a lot to learn from their customers."

Composer Daniel Felsenfeld writes for online services like Andante.com and New Music Box. Originally from California, where he earned his B.F.A. at the University of California at Santa Barbara, he received his Master's from the New England Conservatory of Music.