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News

For Immediate Release

Cedille Records Turns 20

Unlikely Classical Label Piles Up Milestones; Artists Sing Its Praises

CHICAGO, Nov. 29, 2009 — Cedille Records, the Grammy Award-winning, internationally distributed classical record label born two decades ago in a student apartment on Chicago's South Side, embarks this month on its 20th anniversary year.

Cedille (pronounced say-DEE) made its debut in November 1989 with its first CD release, a program of solo piano pieces performed by Chicago-based Soviet émigré pianist Dmitry Paperno. With that initial, small-scale project, Cedille founder James Ginsburg, then 24, launched the first Chicago-based classical record company since the heyday of Mercury Records in the 1950s and 60s.

Since then, Cedille's catalog, which features world-class musicians in and from the Chicago area, has grown and diversified, while attracting critical accolades, an international clientele, and praise from its artists. Cedille has 115 principal CD titles ranging from solo keyboard works to complete symphonies and operas. These include world-premiere recordings and CD premieres of important compositions, plus the commercial recording debuts of some celebrated artists.

New and recent developments

Cedille's projected CD releases for the first quarter of 2010 include the recording debut of Baroque Band, Chicago's new and highly acclaimed period-instrument ensemble, in works by Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber; the world-premiere recording of Beethoven's recently discovered Piano Trio in E-flat, Hess 47, with the Beethoven Project Trio, which gave the world-premiere performance earlier this year in Chicago; and *Dances & Dreams: Music from the Balkans*, the label's second project with the Cavatina Duo (flutist Eugenia Moliner and guitarist Denis Azabagic).

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Also anticipated for 2010 are CDs of Russian cello music with cellist Wendy Warner and pianist Irina Nuzova; flute fantasies with Chicago Symphony Orchestra principal flutist Mathieu Dufour and pianist Kuang-Hao Huang; *Capricho Latino*, solo violin works with a Latin flavor with violinist Rachel Barton Pine; duo-piano works by Debussy and Messaien with pianists Ursula Oppens and Jerome Lowenthal; chamber and vocal music by Stacy Garrop; and a song cycle by Stephen Mackey, performed by eighth blackbird and actor-singer Rinde Eckert, with Mackey on electric guitar.

The label and its parent foundation plan to host a 20th birthday benefit event in 2010. Details have yet to be announced.

A point of pride for the label is that its regular music downloads are 256 kbps MP3 files, twice the industry standard for sound quality. In the coming year, Cedille plans to offer premium-priced CD-quality digital downloads in the lossless FLAC format via its Web site (<http://www.cedillerecords.org>).

Cedille recently launched a “free-download-of-the-week” feature on its Web site and released a 20th anniversary sampler CD available free to purchasers of physical Cedille CDs in the U.S. or Canada.

International distinction

“I’m still pinching myself,” Ginsburg says, surprised as anyone that the entrepreneurial sideline he launched as a first-year law student at the University of Chicago would evolve into a record label of international distinction — and that his life’s work would be as a classical record producer and label impresario rather than a lawyer. Ginsburg, now 44 and president of the label, also continues to produce most of its CDs.

(Ginsburg, who left law school in 1992 to tend to the record label full time, comes from a family of prominent attorneys and legal scholars. His mother, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, is an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. His father, Martin D. Ginsburg, is a noted tax law authority and professor at Georgetown University Law Center. His sister, Jane C. Ginsburg, is a law professor at Columbia University, specializing in intellectual property rights.)

The new-music sextet eighth blackbird, which made its commercial recording debut on Cedille, has four CDs on the label including *strange imaginary animals*, winner of the 2008 Grammy Award for Best Chamber Music Performance, all produced for Cedille by multiple Grammy Award-winner Judith Sherman, known for her work with the Kronos Quartet. *String Poetic*, a recording with violinist Jennifer Koh and pianist Reiko Uchida, also produced by

Sherman, was nominated for a 2009 Grammy Award in the chamber music category. Two of the label's recordings were nominated earlier for Grammy Awards in the category of Best Engineered Classical Recording: *Violin Concertos by Brahms and Joachim*, with violinist Rachel Barton Pine and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Carlos Kalmar; and *Symphonic Works by Robert Kurka*, with the Grant Park Orchestra, also conducted by Kalmar.

Among the label's significant contributions to the world's CD catalog are its recordings of Gian Carlo Menotti's opera *The Medium* (the only available recording of the work at the time of its release) and world-premiere recording of Robert Kurka's opera *The Good Soldier Schweik*, both with Chicago Opera Theater; the world premiere recording of Easley Blackwood's Fifth Symphony with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra conducted by James DePreist, paired with his First Symphony performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Charles Munch (originally released on RCA Records); the world-premiere recording of Franz Clement's 1805 Violin Concerto, paired with Beethoven's concerto, with violinist Pine and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by José Serebrier; two discs of orchestral music by Chicago composer Leo Sowerby (1895–1968), with Paul Freeman leading the Czech National Symphony Orchestra and Chicago Sinfonietta; the three-disc African Heritage Symphonic Series of orchestral works by black composers, with maestro Freeman and the Chicago Sinfonietta; the complete Mendelssohn string quartets with the Pacifica Quartet; a disc of David Diamond's chamber music with the Chicago Chamber Musicians; and *Oppens Plays Carter*, the newest and only fully complete survey of Elliott Carter's solo piano music, performed by Ursula Oppens.

In addition to the aforementioned artists, Cedille has recorded the William Ferris Chorale, Chicago *a cappella*, the Vermeer Quartet, and other artists and ensembles of national and international standing, and has produced two CDs in collaboration with Chicago's innovative Music in the Loft chamber series.

From the outset, Ginsburg says his goal was to showcase Chicago's finest musicians in fresh and imaginative programs on audiophile-quality recordings. The native New Yorker saw in Chicago an abundance of stellar musicians who were ignored by East Coast, West Coast, and European record labels. With the right recording projects, Ginsburg believed he could advance their careers and serve the listening public in equal measure. Cedille would concentrate on attractive, off-the-beaten-path repertoire overlooked by the major labels. Mainstream classical works would show up rarely — and only in the context of innovative programs by artists who have enlightening and compelling interpretations.

“Local focus, international interest” became a guiding principle.

Audiophile Audition magazine’s Steve Ritter writes, “Every release Cedille puts out is of outstanding quality; production values, from ensembles to repertory to booklet notes and package look are never anything less than superb. This is a great example of a locally-organized and locale-specific enterprise taking on global significance over time. It’s hard to find fault with any aspect of their releases, and believe me, as a longtime reviewer, I try hard.”

Cedille’s artists also speak highly of the label. John Bruce Yeh, acting principal clarinetist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, calls it “a company with the greatest musical and fiscal integrity.” Harpsichordist, organist, and fortepiano player David Schrader, one of the label’s earliest and most prolific artists, says Cedille “does an invaluable serve to its artists in giving us an audience cachet, as it were, outside of our customary performance venues.”

Building a Foundation

Ginsburg’s passion for broadcasting the talents of Chicago artists became Cedille’s official mission when the nonprofit Chicago Classical Recording Foundation, which Ginsburg organized in 1993, assumed financial responsibility for the label in January 1994.

Among the foundation’s current board members are Henry Fogel, former executive director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and president of the League of American Orchestras and now dean of Roosevelt University’s College of Performing Arts; Barbara Haws, archivist and historian for the New York Philharmonic since 1984 and executive producer of New York Philharmonic Special Editions recordings; William Josephson, former assistant attorney general and chief of the Charities Bureau of New York State and president of the Peace Corps Institute; and Steve Robinson, vice president and general manager of radio station WFMT.

A nonprofit label, Cedille has won grants from sources as varied as the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, Illinois Arts Council, Aaron Copland Fund for Music, Sara Lee Foundation, and National Endowment for the Arts.

While most record companies are happy just to find people willing to pay for their discs and downloads, Cedille goes them one better: satisfied customers send in cash gifts. “We get individual donations of \$5 to \$100 from buyers who believe in our mission,” says Ginsburg.

In 2006, Ginsburg launched the subsidiary Cedille FOUNDation imprint to produce mid-priced CDs, including sonically enhanced reissues of LP and early CD-era recordings and never-before-released archival recordings by outstanding Chicago artists.

Cedille remains Chicago's only free-standing classical label (the Chicago Symphony Orchestra has its own in-house recording operation).

In addition to its recording activities, the label has produced and participated in educational forums and has presented several of its artists in concert, including the highly successful debut of soprano Patrice Michaels's "Divas of Mozart's Day" program at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill.

Artists' ideas

While Cedille is an artist-focused label, it's not artist run. Ginsburg makes the final decisions on who and what gets recorded. "A project has to be intriguing, commercially viable, and a genuine contribution to the world's catalog of classical recordings," he says. "I take the viewpoint of the listener: Is this a CD I would want to buy?"

In the early years, Ginsburg sought out musicians for his label, inviting them to submit project ideas. Nowadays, artists and agents routinely approach him.

"From the start, I believed that the best programming ideas come from the artists themselves," Ginsburg says. "I don't concoct programs in a vacuum and then go scouting for musicians. I want musicians to record music they care about, music that's special to them and to which they bring distinctive interpretations."

Long odds for small labels

Could Cedille have gotten off the ground today?

Ginsburg has his doubts, mainly because of the difficulty of securing an effective wholesale distributor to sell to retail outlets. Physical CDs are still a vital part of the classical record business, even as digital downloads have gained in popularity, Ginsburg says. "There are only a few good independent distributors, and they're not likely nowadays to bother with a fledgling classical label with only a couple of discs in its catalog."

Since May 2009, Cedille Records has been distributed in the western hemisphere by Naxos of America and its distribution partners and by independent distributors in major international classical music markets. Starting in February 2010, Cedille's distribution in the United Kingdom will shift to Naxos's UK distributor, Select Music & Video Ltd. In March, Naxos will take on worldwide distribution of Cedille's digital downloads to online retailers.

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