

Northeast Ohio Grammy Nominees, Part II: a continued conversation with Bruce Egre and Alan Bise of Azica Records

by Mike Telin



On Sunday, February 8, the 57th Grammy Awards will be presented in Los Angeles. *ClevelandClassical.com* wishes the best of luck to all the Northeast Ohio nominees.

Today we continue our discussion with Azica Records founder and recording engineer Bruce Egre (left) and classical music producer Alan Bise (right). Following an informative conversation about guitarist Jason Vieaux's

Grammy-nominated album *Play*, on Azica, and the nominating process, the topic turned to the ever-evolving recording industry.

I began by asking Egre and Bise to comment on the belief held by many: that the classical music recording industry is on its way to extinction. "No, I don't think it's dead and it won't die. People are simply consuming the music differently, like streaming," Bruce Egre commented. He added that while streaming is good for the consumer, in financial terms it's not necessarily good for the artist or the label.

"As a label you have to continue to look for different types of revenue streams to make up for the evolving way that people consume music," Egre said. "Physical CD sales are way down, downloads are down, and streaming services are up. So again, classical music recordings are not dying, but the delivery method is certainly changing."

Regarding the continued decline in the sale of physical CDs, how much longer will the format be with us? "I think one more generation, and by that I mean 10 to 15 years," Alan

Bise predicted. “The reason they really exist now is for sales to the audience after concerts. I don’t think people are ready to buy a download card. They still want to walk away with a physical copy and put it in their car CD player on the way home. And it’s still something physical that an artist can sign and give to someone. And the vast majority of physical sales come from exactly that interaction. So artists still need to have a physical CD in order to capture those fans.”

How has the Azica business model changed? “We no longer pay an artist, then sell enough CDs to recover our production and artist expenses,” Bise explained. “Now everything is financed. The artist – or somebody – is paying for everything, and we’ve become a service industry. That’s very different, and the consumer doesn’t necessarily know that. Another way a recording helps the artist is through increased bookings. We know a recording that receives a great review doesn’t translate into sales. We’re not even sure if a Grammy does.”

Bise said it’s important to understand that this model has been adopted by the larger labels as well. “It’s not just smaller independents. And the labels that have not gone, or not gone fast enough to that model, are having trouble.”

How have the artists reacted? Bise quickly answered, “Artists now understand that this is the case, and just as they pay a photographer or a writer for liner notes, they pay record labels for their services.” However Egge noted that Azica finances Jason Vieaux’s recordings because he does sell enough copies for them to recoup their costs. But there are fewer and fewer artists who can work under that model.

Does this new model suggest that it’s about quantity over quality? “For us it’s about holding the line on quality. We don’t want to get to the point where we’ll take on anyone because we need the income,” Bise said. “If that were to happen the value of the label name would go out the window, not only for us, but for the artists on our roster, as well.”

On what basis do they make their artistic choices? Again, Alan Bise: “We make the decision on who gets released based on more traditional elements. Are they fantastic players? Do they tour? What does the rest of their professional career entail? We look at their management and PR, those kinds of things. For us, artists have to have all of that in place.”

Why did Bruce Egge start Azica Records? “Perhaps I was a little ignorant,” he answered with a laugh. Egge came to Cleveland to study classical guitar at the Cleveland Institute of Music, but he quickly discovered that the school also had a good audio program and, as he put it, he soon found the other side of the microphone. “One of my teachers was Jack Renner, who was one of the owners of TELARC International. So starting the company just seemed like a fun and interesting thing to do. But looking back, our label

was sort of born out of not knowing what I was doing. If I had known what the industry was like, I probably would have never done it. But I did, and I'm still here, even though many labels have disappeared.”

Azica released one record a year for the first two years and two the third. Today they releas about twelve a year, which Egre says is what the company can handle. “As the head of the audio degree program at CIM, I want to keep myself in the business of recording music, and I think that’s a benefit to my students, too. So we’re at the level where we’ll probably stay.”

Good business fortune came Azica’s way when they became the first independent label to sign with NAXOS distribution. “I’ve gone through a half a dozen distributors over the years who have all gone out of business because they couldn’t survive the changes in the industry,” Egre said. “In the old days, distributors had pallets of CDs in their warehouses and would send them into the marketplace at a very low cost. Then many record stores went out of business, and owed the distributor a lot of money, who in turn owed the labels money. It wasn’t like a check would just show up in my office. Very often I had to get on the phone and be the squeaky wheel.

“We’re fortunate today being with NAXOS – which started as a label but is now the largest distributor around. They too realized that they needed to shift their business model in order to survive, and they have. But speaking of streaming, NAXOS just launched Classics on-line, so Azica recordings are on that service. They’re trying to cater to the classical music audience. The NAXOS music library is a big income source for them. Their sales are up, and since Azica is on that service, we receive income as well.”

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