

Can't Help but CRI

TUESDAY, JANUARY 21, 2003 AT 4 A.M.

I started collecting records when I was 12, in 1968 in Dallas. My dad would take me to work with him at Mobil Oil, and I'd run down the street to the downtown record store, whatever its name was. Records were six dollars, frequently on sale for four, and many was the month in the next 10 years that I would spend every cent I could get on them. I had no idea what I was doing. Raised on Mozart and Rachmaninoff, ambitious to know everything, I'd buy any record by a composer I'd never heard of, figuring most such names were 20th century. And after a while I realized that most of the composers I'd never heard of were on a label called CRI—Composers Recordings Incorporated. I got to where I'd buy anything on CRI.

So when rumors started circulating that CRI was about to close down, and the confirmation came last week, it knocked the breath out of me—like a piece of my childhood taken away. The company had been founded in 1954 by composers Otto Luening and Douglas Moore and arts administrator Oliver Daniel. In the early days I found Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes* on that label, with Maro Ajemian playing—a crucial recording. I found Henry Brant's *Angels and Devils*, most of the Dane Rudhyar recordings, lots of Ralph Shapey. Loads of historical stuff otherwise forgotten: the Quincy Porter "Elegiac" Quintet, the excellent Piano Concerto by the sadly neglected Ben Weber, all of the available Wallingford Riegger recordings, Robert Ward's opera *The Crucible*. Even pieces by my otherwise unknown professors at Oberlin, like Joseph Wood's "Poem for Orchestra."

In 1976 CRI went nonprofit, an unusual move for the time. Nevertheless, by the late '80s the company had stagnated into something of a joke, a label for has-beens in the 12-tone and neo-romantic realms. Then, in 1990, Joseph Dalton took over as executive director. He knew the label's reputation. He decided to turn it around, and by god, he did it. He started a "Downtown" line called Emergency Music, and began recording music from the Bang on a Can festivals, balloon performer Judy Dunaway, Eve Beglarian, and the Common Sense collective. Overnight CRI went from being the old grandpa of new-music labels to being the hip new kid in town, and "Jody" Dalton became a Downtown hero. Even so, recordings of Otto Luening and Robert Starer, and re-releases of Lou Harrison and Carl Ruggles, kept coming.

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That was the thing about CRI. It didn't have the reputation for consistent quality of the more highly curated labels like Lovely Music and New Albion. But it was a label, it seemed, that every composer, eventually, could be on. It was the kind that would put Cage's *The Seasons* (an amazing early work no one knows) on the flip side of Wuorinen's *2-Part Symphony*, forcing opposing camps to own each other's music. No other label was so catholic. It was a meeting place, a melting pot, an institution. It had its drawbacks. To be recorded on CRI, you generally had to raise the cash yourself, albeit with their advice and help, and they told you upfront in their submission guidelines that post-production costs would be \$8500. But that's no longer unusual for new-music labels, and CRI had excellent publicity and distribution.

When Dalton suddenly left CRI in 2000, a shiver of raised eyebrows swept through Downtown music circles. Their closing seems like the drop of the second shoe. The general problems afflicting the record business, rising costs and declining sales, merely hit CRI harder and faster than it did more commercially minded labels. However, the most recent executive director, John G. Schultz, is making arrangements with another nonprofit label to keep everything in the CRI catalog available; details will allegedly be out by the end of this month, probably at www.composersrecordings.com.

I've written a number of obituaries in these pages, but none so sad as this. It's like having the first close-to-home acres of our cultural rain forest stripped away by corporate behemoths determined to destroy all alternatives to their bland commercial pap. I know that in a few years CDs are supposed to become obsolete and we'll download all our music off the Internet, and choices will be unlimited and everything hunky-dory. But as I listen to tinny little MP3s on my laptop, I have a hard time convincing myself that the demise of CRI isn't the beginning of the end.

