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# An art form caught on shifting



**Peter Aspden**  
CULTURE

At the recent BBC Music Magazine awards, I was lucky enough to be sharing a table with one of the winners. The Romanian pianist Luiza Borac is not a household name and neither is that of the composer whose work she has interpreted with such brilliance, her compatriot George Enescu. When she received the award, she did so with a humility and order of priorities that seemed exemplary. The first to be thanked was not her agent, or her manager, or her record company, it was the composer himself. The modesty seemed to come naturally. When people talk of performers who serve their art, this is what they mean.

It is a rare enough phenomenon but very much alive, I was reminded, in the classical music world. The cultural doom-mongers (or doom-peddlers, as I prefer to label them, for their vested interests lie close behind their bombastic pronouncements) would have us believe that all is lost in that particular art form. Their arguments have become familiar: falling CD sales; the proliferation of crossover artists who flaunt their lack of seriousness; the shortening attention span of a public that prefers bite-sized, tuneful melodies to complex and demanding works.

But it is an arid line of polemicising. True, there are important changes

occurring in the classical music industry. The awards ceremony I attended made that clear – surprisingly, all 10 winning CDs were released by independent record labels. That bald fact heralds some important structural shifts. The five-year-old label that put out Borac's work, Avie, is one that relinquishes complete artistic control to its performers. It is a growing and admirable trend. This week, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra released its debut recording of Mahler's Third Symphony on its new in-house label, which is run by a committee that includes orchestra members.

The so-called crisis in classical music is better described as a discomfiting moment for the big record labels. They became bloated with success in the 1980s and 1990s with the invention of the CD, prompting aficionados to replace their entire record collections, and with the discovery that three tenors could make a lustier imprint on the world's cash tills than one.

But that was a phase. They are not going to be able to pull off the CD trick again (although I have to report that one man talked to me solidly for half an hour of the joys of 5.1 Surround Sound, without once mentioning what he played on it) and we now know that Nicola Benedetti cannot be promoted in the