

Just for the record

What makes record collectors tick? Are they really lost in music or are they just obsessive hoarders? Jessica Duchen talks to three people about their collections - and asks how their hobby is being affected by the rapidly changing industry

Friday October 20, 2000

[The Guardian](#)

Giant loudspeakers dominate the room. A large, comfortable chair is carefully positioned opposite them. Shelves full of CDs and LPs occupy every corner and cupboard. This is the inner sanctum of a record collector. People often think that these hoarders are the same as any other boffin: obsessives tucked away behind mountains of their chosen playthings. The truth is slightly different. Record collectors may be primarily males aged over 35, but they hoard their treasure for a reason: their passion for music is not a hobby, but a whole way of life.

The world that supports them, however, is changing fast. Indeed, the word "crisis" is not inappropriate. The mighty Polygram stable has been reduced to a shadow of its former self by successive takeovers; Universal, which includes Deutsche Grammophon and Decca, has recently been acquired by Vivendi, the French corporation with concerns ranging from the internet portal Vizzavi to water, sewage and Connex trains. BMG recently underwent a corporate form of liposuction, shedding many of its finest artists. The biggest threats to the industry "establishment" seem to be from those who have the initiative or the technology to undercut it. Naxos, the budget record label that issues innovative repertoire in good, solid performances at a competitive price, is good news for the consumer but a headache for companies that still sell their discs for three times as much.

In retail, most of the specialist record shops have died a slow death and the growth of disc sales on the internet may threaten those that remain. And the greatest uncertainty in the future concerns the progress of music on the internet: the spread of MP3 downloads, the increasing ease with which artists can record and upload their own performances without recourse to a company and the improving quality of computers' sound systems and speakers. In the light of all this, are record collectors not only a rare species but an endangered one too? I visited three of them to find out what makes them tick.

Nicholas Armstrong, 39, libel lawyer

"I don't collect recordings for the sake of collecting, but because I love music. Before I go to work, I often listen to something for around 20 minutes, to set me up for the day. It's a bit like Zen meditation. I do 'use' music to alter my mood. I've found that at key moments I have turned to specific pieces for their therapeutic properties: the first movement of Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony or Mahler's Fifth at times of bereavement and sadness; a major-key Mozart piano concerto before law exams; or Richard Strauss's Ein Heldenleben before going into battle on a legal case. The CD collection is on one level a cabinet of alternative remedies.

Record collecting does seem to be mainly a male pursuit. Perhaps men like to exercise control over inanimate objects - things that can't answer back! - and to amass a collection that bears their own personal stamp. For example, I like to collect the performances I personally find the best, rather than collecting all the Beethoven sonatas for the sake of completeness. I listen to Radio 3 a great deal, but never Classic FM. I object to the popular side - Vanessa Mae et al - because that cult of personality puts image first and the music last.

I'm never happier than if I can convey my enthusiasm for a piece of music to someone else. I'd be delighted if everybody got a thrill out of listening to Mahler Six. Perhaps the world would be a better place if they did."

Quita Chavez, 81, retired PR for conductors such as Leonard Bernstein and George Szell

At about 2pm I sit down in my listening chair and pin my ears back for around two hours. I do take it very seriously. I couldn't put the ironing board up while I listen to my records and I have my ears syringed twice a year. Some of my friends think I'm crazy to wade through all the record magazines, but how else can I know what's going on? At one point I was spending about £25 a month on them.

I certainly regard recording as an art form, especially the technical side. What some of those companies can do now, transferring historical recordings on to CD, is amazing. My heart still stops for a moment when I see release sheets announcing all those wonderful old performances. But once I was listening to a historical lieder recital on CD and I was not happy with the voice. I listened to my LP to compare the sound and I said to myself: 'Chavez, you're not to get rid of those LPs!'

I've no time for record collectors who won't go to concerts. You have to ally collecting with hearing live performances. Otherwise, how can you know what a good sound should be? All the arts are interrelated; if you don't also love the theatre, serious cinema, the visual arts, good literature, you're only appreciating music with one part of your brain.

I love browsing in record shops. But a lot of the fun has gone out of buying records since so many specialist dealers have closed down. There used to be a shop in the West End called Orchesography. It was like going to a father confessor - you'd talk for hours!

I don't know why more women don't collect. They go to opera and concerts, so why not collect CDs? As for younger people, when I worked in record shops before the war, even then very few customers were younger than 35. The popular stuff is not to my taste. But if the money it makes can be used to subsidise putting on a Janacek opera or contemporary music, then I'm happy to put up with it. I've never had a family, but I have many, many friends. I love my food, I love my vino and I love life. I'm sure record collecting keeps you young. And I'm optimistic about the future of the industry. You have to be. You can't lose your faith."

Robert Layton, 70, critic and former Radio 3 producer

"By the age of 14 I had quite a substantial collection of 78s. My mother used to say: 'There's no point in giving him money, he'll only spend it on records.' Nowadays I think that record collecting is perhaps my way of clinging on to the past. Maybe my record collection runs me, not vice-versa! In my teens and 20s, I bought records to get to know the music better. The commercial catalogues were very thin in those days. For instance, I have a catalogue from 1958; under Mahler, there's no Third Symphony and only one recording of the Seventh. Today so much is available that we tend to take it for granted.

The youth market is very ephemeral. People always say that their products must appeal to the young, but they forget that young people become middle-aged and then old, very quickly! They tend to come later to music because of peer pressure and what Constant Lambert used to call 'the appalling popularity of pop'.

I think the record industry is in a very sad way. The big companies are in trouble, but they brought it on themselves by short-term thinking. Everybody has to make money, but if you don't put a clear artistic objective first, then you're going to get nowhere. The public is obviously not going to keep on buying mainstream repertoire.

The smaller companies, like Chandos, Hyperion and BIS, are now the most successful - they have high technical standards, they are exploratory and they put artistic excellence first. Everyone talks about outreach, but in my view, there's no reason music should be accessible. When Beethoven wrote his string quartet Op 127, he wasn't thinking about the market. He was

reporting on his inner experience. That kind of music will never reach a large audience - and it shouldn't. In many ways, it's private."