



**Norman Lebrecht**

04.02.09

## The great British label that launched the Rolling Stones has another number one hit this week — sadly, it will be the record company's swansong...

It's not often a record label scores a number one hit and shuts down in the same week, so keep an eye on Decca. Barring a last-minute change of heart, the Chiswick-based music icon is going to be wiped off the map before Valentine's Day.

The number one Decca hit is Julia Fischer's debut, a performance of the Bach violin concertos with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, which can be heard on stage at Cadogan Hall this coming weekend. Fischer, 25, is a straight-talking Munich artist with a clear sense of priorities. "Bach has always been a part of my life," she announces on a promotional video. "It was a must for me to record the violin concertos." Rather than having to defer to a conductor, she directs the orchestra herself.



Sour note: Julia Fischer's chart-topping album is let down by shoddy production

Her disc, top of the Billboard classical charts from the day of issue, came out in Britain this week and is moving, they say, very nicely. But the classical music business no longer follows shooting stars and the logic of the market. It's far too busy playing corporate games. Fischer's success is almost certain to be Decca's last.

Decca is a British brand, a piece of bedrock heritage that our forefathers took into the First World War trenches and danced to in the Depression years when Bing Crosby, Stéphane Grappelli and Louis Armstrong were its stalwarts. Vera Lynn sang the nation through the Second World War on Decca, after which a demobbed crew of submarine warriors applied their radar skills to producing the clearest sound anyone had ever heard on record. Decca introduced stereo, the LP and digital recording. It blazed a trail through an industry run by lazy lunchers and stuffed shirts. It may have turned down the Beatles, but it launched the Rolling Stones.

Classical was always its main business. Decca was a singers' label, with Kathleen Ferrier, Joan Sutherland and Luciano Pavarotti. It was an outlet for living composers, with Benjamin Britten and Michael Tippett. It produced the first Ring cycle on record and the first complete survey of Haydn symphonies. Extraordinarily, in a fickle milieu, it commanded lifelong loyalty from most of its artists. One soloist named each of her successive dogs Decca.

The label lost its way and its hold on the pop charts and in the Eighties was sold to a European group that owned its classical rivals Deutsche Grammophon (DG) and Philips. That formation, known as PolyGram, was absorbed into a multinational combine, Universal, operating out of Hollywood and New York. Decca thrived, with the 1990 Three Tenors concert turning into the top-selling classical album of all time. But its stars were ageing and, once Georg Solti and Pavarotti were gone, the Universal desk-jockeys began playing paperclip games with its future. Universal's head of classics and jazz, Christopher Roberts, is a man who believes that neither form can ever make enough money to justify his bonus. Roberts, from the mid-1990s, became a convert to crossover — a catch-all genre that involves getting old rockers like Sting to sing classical, baroque divas like Anne-Sofie von Otter to sing Abba and middle-roaders like Katharine Jenkins and Hayley Westenra to pretend that they are opera stars when they have never sung an opera in their short-breathed lives. The Universal dream of heaven is Bryn Terfel duetting with Ronan Keating. Nothing was too low for its taste. At one point Decca signed a sex-change Paddington street-walker, plucked off a BBC reality show where she was seen playing the piano.

Three years ago, Roberts appointed the subservient Bogdan Roscic as head of Decca and gave the label a predominantly crossover role, while keeping DG for a classical elite. But if crossover was to convince the grannies that it was a cultural product, it needed a DG imprimature. Once Ronan Keating had joined Elvis Costello and Sting on the supposedly highbrow imprint, followed by barrel-scrapings from television talent shows, Decca was left shivering in recessionary snow.

Roscic had little to show for his three years other than a failed venture in live concert streaming and the signature three months ago of Julia Fischer, a promising violinist on a small Dutch outlet. When Roscic heard Roberts was planning to scrap Decca, he jumped ship last week to long-dormant Sony Classical, where he has been given a grand title but not much of a budget.

The handful of staff who remain in Decca's Chiswick offices are waiting for the chop. They expect to be told before the week is out that Decca is history, thanks for the memory. In times like these when household names are vanishing daily, the loss of a record label hardly qualifies for national mourning. But the abolition of Decca is more than just another colophon going to the wall. Decca represented something to artists and record buyers. Once it was the label that scorned star power, sending tyrants like Herbert von Karajan into shock when producers and engineers refused to obey his orders. Decca was also a sound to remember, an uncluttered clarity: home-made, high-tech and unfailingly discreet, a sound that never played ping-pong with your ears.

These qualities have long been laid to rest, as the new Fischer disc all too grimly demonstrates: her sound is poorly balanced and over-bright. Any subtlety she may have tried to convey is

blown out of all proportion by all-purpose engineering from a freelance team that has no history with Decca. Nor is there much sign of a producer's intervention. Fischer plays with steely athleticism but not much forethought or refinement. Comparison with the young Anne-Sophie Mutter, equally metallic but infinitely more controlled, puts Fischer firmly in the lower leagues. Decca in its heyday would not have passed this product.

Still, no point in waxing nostalgic. Lots of firms are going to the wall, taking their traditions to oblivion. Decca joins a long queue at the morgue. The regret is that what dies with Decca is more than just a label — it is the very concept of label as a mark of character, a name that united artists and listeners in the search for a particular quality. The idea of label defined the record industry. It is the strategic antithesis of sterile agglomerates like Universal.

Without labels, artists spin off to Starbucks, listeners lose interest and the remnants of the record business go rummaging in dumpsters. Even a number-one classical hit barely shifts 500 copies a week, not enough to support an executive's pension fund. It's the end of the line for Decca, the last waltz in a bare-walled studio of dreams.

Link to:   

[| Show all](#)

### Reader Views (6)

Here's a sample of the latest views published. You can click [view all](#) to read all views that readers have sent in.

Laminated with "Clarifoil" made by British Celanese. The end of an era. Universal can keep its seemingly overload, overcompressed and over noise-reduced CDs. I've gone back to vinyl.

**- Oxenholme, Kendal, England**

Well, it had to happen. Classical music becomes more and more a niche market. Labels like Bis and Hyperion know more about the future classical music lover than Universal...

Rolf

**- Rolf Den Otter, Delft Netherlands**

Incisive essay by Lebrecht. A postscript postmortem to his last book. Sad to hear the news.

**- Eddie Williamson, Los Angeles, Calif. USA**

### Add your comment

[Show all](#)

Name:

Email: Your email address will not be published

Town and country:

Your comment: [Terms and conditions](#)

You have 1500 characters left. [make text area bigger](#)

Remember me - this will save your name, location and email address for when you leave your next comment.

Email me a link to these comments.