

Yarlung Records

Catching up with Bob Attiyeh

Jeff Wilson

Much has been made of the vinyl resurgence that began a little over a decade ago, but that was really part of something larger that had already started brewing. Suddenly new audiophile labels were popping up that switched or added formats as tastes changed and new technology became available. When Yarlung Records released its first album in 2005, it was definitely ahead of the curve, and for a small, hands-on label, Yarlung quickly achieved an outsized presence, with both Grammy nominations and awards and a large international audience. Recently, we interviewed the Executive Director of Yarlung, Bob Attiyeh, whose passion for music and insight into the record process have served the label well.

The lockdown has thrown a curveball into the music industry, and I'm curious how it affected you. Did you stay busy, or did everything grind to a halt?

I was secretly hoping to get bored during this lockdown period and catch up on additional reading. Not so lucky! Rather than lamenting six recordings we had to cancel or postpone, I focused on five fresh vinyl releases, music I was itching to hear on vinyl and which Yarlung enthusiasts had been clamoring for. I'm happy to say we turned our shutdown into an opportunity for Bernie Grundman and me to cut lacquers for three jazz titles, one Latin title, and one classical record.

Also, soprano Laura Strickling and I were able to complete and release her album *Confessions* (recorded before the pandemic hit), which recently won a Grammy nomination. We're keeping our fingers crossed, and voting in the final round is underway.

And during a brief window last autumn, after triple vaccination and with multiple testing, I was able to work with Sangam Duo, which features Paul Livingstone on sitar and Peter Jacobson on cello, to create a pretty phenomenal recording of classical

ragas with a modern twist, as well as an additional album of almost new age impromptus. I'm guessing this latter project will appeal to people who use music for meditation as much as to people listening for audiophile and musical pleasure.

Can you give us a quick overview of what the scope of the label has been thus far, including a rough count of how many releases you have to date and what genres are represented?

Within a few months Yarlung will have released 54 albums. It is hard for me to believe that we are celebrating Yarlung's 15th Anniversary. We have supported music in classical, jazz, and world music (now called global) so far, and are about to release our first foray into electronic components and even New Age.

With classical music, are your recordings weighted more toward chamber music or orchestral music?

Working with full orchestra is a special treat, and ironically, the setup is sometimes less challenging than for smaller ensembles. With larger forces microphone placement needs to be within the right foot, not the right inch. This is helpful with 40 or 90 musicians and a major conductor on the

clock. So far Yarlung has released ten projects including a full orchestra and many more than that with smaller ensembles.

Which artist (or ensemble) has the most releases on Yarlung?

Finnish violinist Petteri Iivonen has been part of more projects than any other musician so far. Our initial recording session in Alfred Newman Hall at USC with Petteri and pianist Kevin Fitz-Gerald turned into two albums, *Art of the Violin* and *Art of the Sonata*. Subsequently Petteri told me he and two friends had formed Sibelius Piano Trio and they wanted to fly to Los Angeles to work with Yarlung again. I hesitated briefly until Petteri told me those two friends happened to be piano virtuoso Juho Pohjonen, whom I had heard as piano soloist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and firebrand cellist Samuli Peltonen. We developed a program to showcase the sublime piano trios of Sibelius' early adulthood and to show off the trio's facility with new music.

We included works by the extraordinary Kaija, Lotta Wennakoski, and two new pieces we commissioned from David S. Lefkowitz and Diego Schissi. We dedicated this album to Finland's 100th

MUSIC

Anniversary of independence from Russia, and the album earned a Grammy nomination and a nomination for an International Classical Music Award. We released some of this magnificent music on vinyl in 2021 and I am happy to say it is flying off the shelves. The delicate acoustics of Samueli Theater at Segerstrom Center for the Arts show off this trio's ability, and the three musicians sound like they are performing for you live.

Let's say that you're talking to someone who's never heard any releases on Yarlung Records, and you were asked to recommend one title from your discography. Which one would you choose?

If we start with vinyl, our eight jazz titles with Sophisticated Lady Jazz Quartet and Yuko Mabuchi are the most popular around the world. But when I am looking for a Yarlung audio fix, I gravitate to two vocal albums. Our first release with mezzo soprano Sasha Cooke captures a recording that remains one of my all-time favorite experiences in my life. Remembering sitting halfway back in the spectacular acoustics of Zipper Hall at The Colburn School and hearing Sasha and the orchestra generate such magnificent sound gives me goose bumps to this day. I studied voice for decades, and my training helps me work constructively with singers. Sasha's album *If You Love for Beauty*, named for one of the Mahler songs she sings on the album, is one of those things I will always be proud to have helped bring to life. Bernie Grundman and I cut those lacquers five times before they sounded like I wanted.

The other vocal album I listen to all the time is *Lifeline: Music of the Underground Railroad*. *Lifeline* was a project I dreamed of for 20 years, after falling in love with the album *Standing in the Safety Zone* by the Fairfield Four. Spirituals are in danger of dying out, supplanted often these days by Gospel music with electric organs, big choirs, and lots of glitz. The singers and I dedicated our album to Harriet Tubman, who allegedly used some of these songs as memory aids to help slaves escape to The North and to Canada before and during the civil war. Michelle and I and her quartet recorded this in Samueli Theater at Segerstrom Center for the Arts. Not only do I love this music and the way they sang it, but I am es-

pecially proud of the way we captured the sound, which wraps around the listener thanks to the acoustics in the hall and thanks to Sonorus Holographic Imaging technology, which we use in the analog domain between the microphone preamps and the analog tape deck and digital recorders. They are albums I play to introduce people to what we do at Yarlung Records. Both are available on CD and all the download media too, of course, including DSD and high-res PCM.

What's your most popular format, currently, and has that changed since the early days of the label?

As soon as Yarlung started recording on analog tape and then pressing vinyl, our vinyl

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has been our most popular format in most of the countries where Yarlung titles are distributed, certainly in North America, most of Europe, and much of Asia. Notable exceptions are Germany and Japan, where DDs still command enormous respect.

Where do you prefer to record? And what microphones do you typically use, and what steps do you take to capture the sound of instruments in a studio or hall?

Concert halls! They are the secret ingredient in our audiophile sauce, if there is one, is that we record in acoustics spaces. We utilize their natural ambiance and decay... we "mix and master" by carefully situating our musicians, placing the microphone or

microphones carefully, and adjusting the acoustics in the hall where that is an option. This means we don't have to do much beyond choosing takes and setting volume levels after the recording has been captured to tape and to our high-resolution digital formats.

In truth, that secret sauce also comes from the equipment we choose or has been specially designed for us. We use microphone preamplification by Elliot Midwood and analog tape recorders and SHI by Arian Jansen. I designed our interconnects and we use Merging Technologies and SonoruS equipment for our digital capture. We tend toward AKG C24 and Neumann U-47 microphones, and Agfa formula 468 tape. We

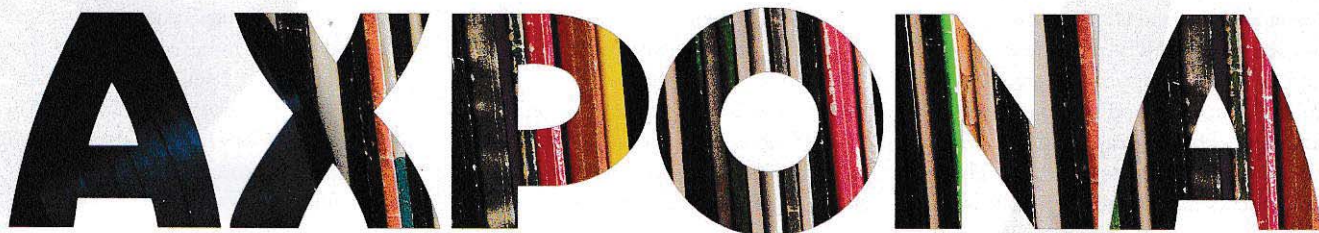
don't use a mixing board. All of these choices, added to my own tone concept, enables us to capture the energy of our musicians in these extraordinary acoustic spaces as well as we can.

Does the size of the ensemble influence the recording space that you end up choosing?

For our jazz albums, we gravitated toward USC's Cammilleri Hall, which seats just under 100 people. Cammilleri was designed by Yasuhisa Toyota, who was also chief acoustician for Walt Disney Concert Hall. Cammilleri's size and configuration lend themselves to the sound of a jazz club. For our larger recordings with orchestras or choral ensembles, we record in venues such as Walt Disney Concert Hall, Ambassador Auditorium, Royce Hall at UCLA, or Samueli Theater at Segerstrom Center for the Arts. The 400-seat Zipper Hall at The Colburn School remains one of my favorites too, where we recorded a number of chamber-sized ensembles, including Janaki String Trio, our solo piano projects, Smoke & Mirrors Percussion Ensemble, and so forth. Antonio Lysy and I made Yarlung's first GRAMMY® winning album at The Broad Stage in Santa Monica, which earned recognition as one of *The Absolute Sound's* top 40 recordings of all time.

We have since recorded three albums at the Imhof Studio in New Mexico. This is a large space used by the lithographer and painter Joseph Imhof, with high ceilings, adobe walls, and intimate acoustics. I have been very happy with the results. **tas**

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