

Point of Departure

an online music journal

Jumpin' In

a column by

Greg Buium, December 2017

These are apocalyptic days for small, creative-music labels. If digital downloads began chipping away at the CD market more than a decade ago, streaming, with its exponential growth over the past few years, has been catastrophic. Speak to a producer now and you end up talking about music-delivery systems – about format – more than anything else.

“Well, yes, because we’re trying to survive ... to find a way to go through,” Michel Levasseur said recently, from the office of Victo Records in Victoriaville, Quebec. “I’ve been feeling as if I had work that was going to be extinguished – there are some trades that don’t exist anymore! I’m feeling like that with the music at the moment for the label.”

Last month, spurred by a pair of new releases, I called two prominent independent producers, Levasseur and Patrik Landolt at Intakt Records. This fall Victo celebrated its 30th anniversary with the release of Anthony Braxton’s *Solo* (Victoriaville) 2017. In January, Intakt, in its 33rd year, will issue its 300th recording, the Sylvie Courvoisier

Trio’s *D’Agala*. These are remarkable milestones, and I wanted to talk about it. We spoke about music and art and the extraordinary life cycle of the companies they created. I spoke to each of them separately. Yet hanging over everything was the brutal reality of today’s business model.

“Michel and I, we know each other,” Landolt said during a mid-afternoon telephone interview from his base in Zurich. “We met not long ago in Mulhouse, at the festival [in France]. We are both concerned with the development of the music industry and the CD industry and everything. But we both came too late in a way.”

Landolt reflected, and began to laugh, despite this wistful observation. He and Levasseur knew then, he said, that they’d hit their stride just as the CD market was beginning its decline. “Twenty years ago, thirty years ago, it was easier to survive and to pay the production with the sales.”

But there have always been hurdles, and in spite of them, Landolt and Levasseur have still produced more than their fair share of masterworks – from Intakt’s London Jazz Composers Orchestra albums, Alexander von Schlippenbach’s *Monk’s Casino* (2005) and Cecil Taylor’s *Willisau Concert* (2002), to Victo’s latest from Anthony Braxton (his 10th on the label, the most of any artist) and older albums like Phil Minton’s *mouthfull of ecstasy* (1996) and Evan Parker’s *Seven: ElectroAcoustic Septet* (2014).

An imprint’s name is a declaration: there will be more of these to come. In 2017, we see these wonderful accomplishments – 30 years, 300 discs – and we crave continuity. Levasseur spoke at various times of “finding a way through”: of trying to navigate this fragile ecosystem, to see past its cruel decline. Landolt looks forward trying to cement his label’s legacy – so Intakt will outlast him, existing well into the future, as any other European cultural institution might expect to.

One thing is clear: this is a crossroads moment. To take stock of Victo and Intakt, at this critical juncture in their stories, is to confront the questions facing any number of their peers today.

Starting out in the mid-1980’s, Patrik Landolt’s models were never record labels: book publishers were his main influence. “You know, perhaps when you see a person like [Klaus] Wagenbach, the publishing house in Germany, or [Peter] Suhrkamp, the company where Bertolt Brecht and Max Frisch published – how they really have been in discussion with their writers, their whole life,” he explained.



Joanne Vézina and Michel Levasseur
From Victo Records in Victoriaville

Manfred Eicher, Landolt noted, played that role at ECM as well. “From his point of view and from his aesthetic he does a great job: he also follows his musicians. For his whole life now he’s worked with Keith Jarrett.”

Landolt, too, has cultivated collaborations that span the decades: with Irène Schweizer (Intakt 001 is hers, as were seven of the label’s first 10 releases), Barry Guy, Alexander von Schlippenbach, Aki Takase, Sylvie Courvoisier. When we spoke he’d just gotten off the phone with saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock, a more recent addition to the Intakt roster; they would meet up at Jazzfest Berlin later that week. Landolt was also planning to see Schlippenbach and Takase, who are based in the German capital. Saxophonist Angelika Niescier, who last year released NYC Five with pianist Florian Weber, was to be awarded the Albert Mangelsdorff Prize at the festival as well.

Traditionally, the producer (or the publisher) might be many things to the artist: steward, partner, manager, editor, therapist, mentor, etc. The best among them facilitate great things. Now, however, in both books and music, there’s a ready reply: it’s all D.I.Y. Ambitious artists can get their work out there straight; intermediaries (of any kind) aren’t required. If, say, John Coltrane were a young man today he might just put out his music himself. The record label is obsolete.

“If he wants to bring it out by himself he would need a good office who works for him,” Landolt replied, then pointed out two of the key (and complex) aspects of the Intakt operation, promotion and distribution. He called distribution “the hardest job today”: getting the physical product into stores around the world and making sure digital distribution is handled properly. To Landolt, this new order actually makes companies like Intakt even more vital.

“This is our job,” he repeated. “It’s possible that there are some genius musicians who have 10 hands, you know. They give lessons, play concerts, have their own label, perhaps even a TV station – I don’t know how they function! But it’s a serious profession to do this.” It’s unforgiving, full-time work, Landolt explained, “to be involved and to know what’s going on.”

That, I suspect, is what Levasseur meant when he talked about “finding a way through.” To know what’s going on – right now – is to talk about format. Both Intakt and Victo started out in vinyl. Soon, they shifted to CD. In the new century they’ve embraced, to varying degrees, digital downloads and streaming. But to many observers, the compact disc has now entered its sunset era.

This might be the true existential crisis: that the physical product will vanish.

“I have no interest myself in releasing music only on the Internet,” Levasseur observed. “I love making these, having a product in my hand, and selling the CD. Every festival I go to – I’ve just been to Tokyo for the first time – I bring a box of CDs with me. Sometimes I even have a little table at the back of a hall, make promotion on the Victo label. It’s my life you know.”

Neither imprint has a signature look; each album is created individually to fit a specific aesthetic. Landolt and Levasseur labor over every tiny detail. They’re involved in all aspects of a CD’s production: the art, the notes, the casing.

Landolt’s commitment to a virtual presence is real; his belief in a physical product is unwavering. “I think there’s a lot of young people that love to have CDs in their hand, and artwork, and the booklet, and our catalog,” he said.

The math, however, can be painful reading. Take Victo. For nearly 25 years, Levasseur explained, he was putting out five or six CDs a year. The label is now down to one. Every year over the past five, faltering sales required reducing the label’s budget by another 20 percent. Initially, downloads were supposed to be the savior. It took a while to convince the public to pay, but eventually they did; Levasseur soon joined. Over the past two years, however, Victo’s sales have seen a 70-percent drop. The reason? Streaming.

“As it is free, like it is now, we’re getting pages of sales report, 20 pages, with hundreds of clicks, and we get \$100 at the end of all of this,” Levasseur explained. “Our distributor thought it would be the end if we didn’t go there ... or he thinks it might pay at one point.”

Levasseur has stopped putting up new releases online. “It’s all about finding a way. If the streaming or the downloads was worthwhile, if it was enough money to make a label a living, or to give the musicians an income. At the moment it’s how to get paid for this music: we are all working on it. That’s basically the problem.”

Victo started out as a promotional tool, a souvenir, for the central activity in Levasseur’s life, and his livelihood: the annual Festival International de Musique Actuelle. Financially, he was never under any illusions about the label. For years, Victo averaged 1,200 sales per title, including discs by younger, experimental artists – from Quebec’s René Lussier to Vancouver’s Hard Rubber Orchestra. (Amazingly, Victo’s first recording, Lussier and Fred Frith’s *Nous Autres*, is still its best-seller, at more than 5,000.) More recently, Victo has paid homage (Levasseur’s word) to its iconic artists: Braxton, Musica Elettronica Viva, Frith, Evan Parker, Peter Brötzmann. It’s been largely about economics.



«Nous Autres»
Fred Frith/René Lussier

“We cannot produce more CDs, because of how the business is at the moment,” he said. “To put out a CD and sell only 200 copies: it doesn’t make sense anymore.”

Anxiously, we look forward. Record labels – as they’ve been constituted for decades – churn, dragged along by big tech and big business. If compact-disc players cease to exist, CDs cannot survive. That physical product – to keep it alive – feels like the great challenge. I asked Levasseur and Landolt about vinyl. Long-playing records are a no-go zone: they’re simply too expensive to make and to ship. Landolt, for his part, doesn’t rule vinyl out, especially in the future. Today, it’s just not practical.

But take out the product, and zero in on the producer. The curator’s art is immune from these struggles. The great music producers, people like Patrik Landolt or Michel Levasseur, are dug so deeply into music-making that the art can never be fully realized without them. In this, we might consider Landolt’s reference to the legendary book publishers, men and women who were often editors as well, whose acumen writers often lauded with the highest regard.

Or consider Levasseur’s equally admirable tack. “We try to go deeper – and try to find artists who are a bit more known who might drum up a new audience. But at the same time they have to do something very interesting; they have to be searching on their side, and presenting projects that they don’t allow themselves to do in their bigger world.” He singled out Braxton’s new solo disc or Bill Dixon’s last, *Envoi* (2011). He was buoyed by the discovery of Canadian throat singer Tanya Tagaq, whose album *Anuraaqtuq* (2010) helped spur her renown.

Figuring out practical matters is of course the producer’s job. But a “fire for the music” – as Landolt termed it – is everything. If given the chance, most musicians I know would still want to be partnered with a like-minded label. The D.I.Y. ethic, no matter how possible it might be, is only viable if you have the fire, the attention to detail, and the check-book balancing skills of the great producers. Artists are at their best producing art.

<http://www.pointofdeparture.org/PoD61/PoD61JumpinIn.html>

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