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A Fascinating Read – The Story of Naxos, by Nicolas Soames

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I've been a fan of the Naxos classical music label since early in its history, and I usually acquire many of their new releases each month at the one remaining decently-sized classical brick and mortar outlet in NYC, J&R on Park Row. When I saw a review of this new book in a British record magazine, I had to get my hands on it, and ordered from amazon.co.uk. (I don't know whether it is available from any US-based retailer, but it should be.)

Nicolas Soames runs Naxos AudioBooks, one of the subsidiary product lines within the overall Naxos empire, but his background is in classical music: has been a music journalist and he started his own independent record label, Clarinet Classics, which became part of the Naxos distribution empire early on. He is not an impartial observer, but I don't think this is an "authorized" corporate history either, although he clearly had the cooperation of many Naxos people, including most importantly founder and CEO Klaus Heymann and Heymann's wife, the Japanese-born violinist Takako Nishizaki, and his writing about the two of them tends towards the rhapsodic. What this book is, however, is a very thorough, very readable account of how the Naxos label got started, how it grew, and how it came to supplant the so-called "majors" as the most important and largest classical recording label in the world, in a relatively brief period of time. Soames' privileged inside access as an observer and interviewer pays off in the interesting detail he can provide, based on his intimate knowledge of the company and the key players.

As such, this is an absolutely fascinating book, and anybody who is a classical recording fan would get a big kick out of it and learn a lot about how classical recording now works. My only criticism of the book is that it seems not to have had thorough editing, because there is a fair amount of repetition that a good editor would have squeezed out of it. (However, unlike all too many books these days, it seems to have had careful proofreading, as it is free of typographical and spelling errors.) The 450 pages could easily have been 400 or fewer and covered all the same detail. Setting that aside, however, I found it to be very informative, very entertaining, and I suspect it would prove beneficial to young entrepreneurs who are thinking of starting their own companies, because it provides lots of information about how that was done in the case of Naxos. It is a business saga as well as an inside look at the 21st century classical music industry.
