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In the Footsteps of Jan Ladislav Dussek
An Interview by Paul Archambault

Frederick Marvin

PAUL ARCHAMBAULT: Professor Marvin, as an internationally known concert pianist, professor of piano, and artist-in-residence at Syracuse University, you have recently become interested in a relatively obscure eighteenth-century Czech composer named Jan Ladislav Dussek. How — and why — did this come about?

FREDERICK MARVIN: I first became interested in Dussek when I browsed through a music shop in Prague a number of years ago and found a Czech edition of his piano sonatas that at first glance looked rather unusual. Then three years ago my recording company, Genesis, which releases a great deal of romantic music, asked me if I knew about Dussek and if I would be interested in recording all twenty-nine of his sonatas. My first reaction was shock — because by then I knew that Dussek’s piano sonatas were very large compositions. To enter into such a project when the composer’s works were not only unknown to the general public but also, frankly, unknown to me seemed like a very dubious undertaking. I hesitated. But I took the four volumes of Dussek’s sonatas that I had bought in Prague — now, incidentally, out of print — and I went to the piano that evening.

By the time I had finished volume 1, I was so entranced by this beautiful music that I immediately called Genesis. “Send the contract,” I said.

ARCHAMBAULT: What was your reaction after studying all the sonatas?

MARVIN: I felt I had found a figure whose music was so important that he stood as a movement on his own. I also found that Dussek must have been a tremendous influence on other composers of a later romantic period, such as Chopin and Schumann; and even on his contemporaries — Beethoven, for example, who was ten years younger than he. Dussek’s style, even from the...
very early works, was protoromantic. In other words, he summed up and added to the emotional scope of the Sturm and Drang era, to the point where he influenced the major composers of the romantic period. Even in the early works we find expressions of emotion written out in his music: markings such as *con amore*, *con duolo*, *disperato*, and so on. You can imagine my excitement in “discovering” such a major composer.

As I went through the sonatas, I had a feeling—which is almost an instinct of mine, now that I have done so much research on Padre Antonio Soler — that something was wrong; I did not believe I was working with an *Urtext* edition, although the Czechs claimed that their 1963 printing was in fact an *Urtext*. They had used as their source the Breitkopf & Haertel editions, printed in two sets from 1813 to 1817. However, these works were issued after Dussek’s death and therefore could not have been examined by the composer himself. At this time, by the way, Dussek’s name was so famous that Breitkopf & Haertel, a great publishing house in Leipzig, interrupted their publishing of Beethoven and Mozart to produce a complete edition of Dussek’s works.

In any case, the Czech edition that I was working with left out many dynamic expressions as well as all pedal indications. (Dussek, incidentally, was the first composer that we know of to write out exact pedal indications.) Furthermore, most of the rinforzando signs had been changed to sforzando. The Czech text indicated that such use of rinforzando was an anachronism; but this is not the case, and the terms are not interchangeable.

So with all this in mind, I tried to find first editions of Dussek for the recording project. I started out using Breitkopf & Haertel, not from the Czech printing but from the original plates, which I was able to get in copies from Cornell University. However, further checking of original sources was impossible in the States. So I went searching in European libraries, following Dussek’s own travels. I knew that he had spent ten years in London and had published a great deal of music there. I was able to find a number of first editions at the British Museum and the Royal College of Music. Sometimes I noticed that the first and second editions were written and published in the same year—in a few cases only one month apart; I consider both to be first editions, since one usually was published in France and the other in Germany or England. After London I went to Paris and worked at the Bibliotheque Nationale; then on to Brussels, where I found some very early opus works in first editions.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** Did you find any original manuscripts?

**MARVIN:** Very few. The publishing firms probably destroyed the manuscripts when they went out of business, although in Paris I did find two manuscripts of the *Elégie harmonique*.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** I am interested in the deletion of pedal indications by the publisher, which you mentioned had occurred in the Czech text. Why do you think this was done?

**MARVIN:** Because the original pedal indications seem a bit strange today. Our idea of the use of pedal has changed since the early nineteenth century, and we now feel that we must pedal at each harmonic change. Earlier the pedal was used more exten-
sively, to the point of blurring the harmonies. For instance, Beethoven's *Waldstein Sonata* contains pages of harmonic changes with the pedal signs running straight through them. One can argue that the fortepiano at that time did not have the resonance of pianos today. That is true, of course, but the blurring would still have taken place. That specific pedal effect was what the composer wanted. Even in the late Haydn sonatas of the London period—the great *C Major Sonata* London no. 60, for example, the composer indicated that the pedal should be held through various changes of harmony. Today's pianists usually don't follow Haydn's pedal indications, but they are missing the precise sound that the composer wanted.

ARCHAMBAULT: You mentioned at the beginning of our conversation that Dussek's style can be understood in part as proto-romantic. Can you tell us something more about his influence on romantic music?

MARVIN: His influence must have been extensive, because all of his musical works were published at the time he composed them and therefore became immediately available to composers. Dussek's music circulated. He had a great following in all of Europe because he was the greatest piano virtuoso of his day.

Dussek, of course, predated the flowering of the romantic period, which began to emerge in the early part of the nineteenth century. His musical indications, such as *lamentabile*, *amoroso*, or *sforzando*, were not common to his own era but became typical of music written for the later period of the Emfindsamkeit, or what we call the sensibility movement. Music then broke out of the mold of classical severity and found a style that was a little more loosely organized than the purely formal structure of, say, the piano sonatas of Mozart or Haydn.

ARCHAMBAULT: As I was listening to your recording of the *Invocation Sonata* recently, I was struck by certain passages which, it seems to me, could have been composed by Beethoven. In the Adagio section I heard portions that sound very much like Chopin. It is curious that these passages were written so early.

MARVIN: Yes it is. That reminds me of a strange experience I had in Paris while going through the collection of Dussek first editions. I found a set of three sonatas published in 1787 and had them microfilmed and enlarged. As I was playing the third sonata, *L'Amante disperato*, I was startled to find a theme that was very familiar. Suddenly I realized that I had played it often: It was the opening theme of the second movement of Beethoven's *First Piano Concerto*. Even the key and time signature were the same. Yet the Beethoven was written eleven years later. It is stretching the word *coincidence* to include an identical time signature, key signature, and melody. Today we would call this plagiarism, but the word now means something quite different from what it meant in the eighteenth century. At that time a composer complimented a colleague by borrowing. If he liked a melody, he might expand and develop it. Now Beethoven considerably expanded Dussek's melody and used it in bigger and, I would say, greater form. Dussek's melody became the starting point for Beethoven's *First Piano Concerto*. 

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ARCHAMBAULT: Did copyrights exist then?

MARVIN: Actually there was no copyright law at that time. But there were certain ideas in the air, so to speak—a certain formula of writing, or a format; and the format could be used by many other composers. For example, there is a very close similarity between the opening bars of Padre Antonio Soler’s *F Major Sonata* M. V. 27 and the opening bars of Mozart’s K. V. 333 sonata. However, Soler’s music was not printed during his lifetime, and Mozart’s sonata probably did not reach the Iberian peninsula.

ARCHAMBAULT: In your research on Dussek have you found any indications about what type of man he was—his personality, his physical appearance?

MARVIN: Dussek was supposed to have been genial in character and quite charming. Everybody said he was a handsome man, although by contemporary standards he was very heavy. In later life he became so obese that it was difficult for him to get out of bed or walk. In fact, he curtailed public appearances in his last four years.

ARCHAMBAULT: Has Dussek left us any written documents about himself?

MARVIN: We have letters written to his wife and father, to his publisher Pleyel, to the composer Clementi, and others. Dussek was also selling Clementi’s pianos. Judging from Dussek’s correspondence, he was conversant in many languages; he wrote in German, French (in which he was extremely fluent), his own native Bohemian, and English. We also have a few letters written not long after he arrived in London; apparently he learned English very quickly.

ARCHAMBAULT: Can you tell us something about Dussek’s background? What sort of milieu produced him?

MARVIN: He was born in 1760 in the little town of Časlav, Bohemia, about forty-five miles south of Prague. He came from a musical family. His father was an organist and composer, his mother a harpist, and his brother a well-known organist who became famous in Milan. His sister Veronica was a pianist and singer and subsequently married a publisher who later printed Dussek’s works. Dussek studied piano with his father from the age of five and began the organ when he was nine. He went through the gymnasium in Časlav, and then he entered the Jesuit gymnasium in Kutná Hora.

ARCHAMBAULT: Is it exceptional that Bohemia gave us such a great musician—or is it a fertile land for musicians?

MARVIN: Extremely fertile. Names like Benda, Rejcha, Tomášek, Smetana, Dvořák, and Janáček come easily to mind. There have been great Czech composers for the past three centuries.

ARCHAMBAULT: Getting back, for a moment, to Dussek’s education—where did he go after the Jesuit gymnasium?

MARVIN: He went to the University in Prague, where he studied philosophy. Then at the age of eighteen he left Czechoslovakia and did not return until he was forty-two. He left the country with his patron, Captain Maenner of the Austrian army, and went to Belgium, where he established himself as an organist—studying, composing, and teaching organ and piano. Then he went to
Amsterdam, to Bergen op Zoom, and to The Hague, where his first compositions were published, I believe in 1782.

ARCHAMBAULT: Apparently he started composing at a rather advanced age.

MARVIN: Yes, and his early compositions were hardly the work of a genius. One could say only that Dussek was well schooled. But by 1787, when he wrote *L’Amante disperato* in Paris—where, incidentally, he had made connections with the royal family—a tremendous change had occurred. This sonata is completely different from opus 3, as if another composer had written it. Dussek was able to express emotion on a large scale, from the wildness of the opening to the later dramatic changes of keys and tremendous differences in dynamic indications going from triple forte to triple pianissimo. These all express the desperateness of love and the changes in Dussek’s life.

ARCHAMBAULT: Were there any specific incidents that we know of?

MARVIN: Yes, for example, his contact in France with a broader culture. Dussek was then a touring virtuoso, and he was able to meet great men of letters and of the arts. Nonetheless, his music shows startlingly quick growth.
ARCHAMBAULT: Did he remain in Paris during the revolution?

MARVIN: By that time his contact with the royal family was becoming dangerous, and he wisely fled to England. We know from English newspaper reports that Dussek arrived in London in 1789. He was immediately presented on various concert series. London was then filled with great musicians: Haydn; Clementi; Viotti; Cramer; Salomon, the violinist; Madame Krumpholtz, the harpist; and Sophia Corri, Dussek's future wife, who made her debut at about the time that Dussek arrived.

ARCHAMBAULT: I take it, then, that Dussek was received as an established celebrity.

MARVIN: Yes, indeed, he was very well known. He quickly became the leading pianist in England and remained there for a decade, performing and composing extensively. Dussek was, by the way, the first pianist to turn the piano so that his profile showed to the audience. This was not an innovation by Liszt, as is commonly thought. Up to that time pianists showed their backs to the spectators.

Musically the London years were filled with unusual accomplishments. Opus 10, which is the next higher plateau after opus 4, has a set of three piano sonatas with violin accompaniment ad libitum. Because it was the practice of the day for the amateur violinist to be given something to do, very often a simple violin accompaniment was written, just doubling what the piano was playing. The violin actually had no solo at all. When Dussek later wrote a piano and violin sonata that did not have a violin accompaniment ad libitum, it was impossible to play the sonata with piano alone; the violin had to be a part of it. This was a true chamber music piece. Dussek wrote a number of chamber music pieces.

ARCHAMBAULT: Do you yourself consider the works of opus 10 the greatest of the London period?

MARVIN: Actually opus 35, which came later, shows a still-greater growth. The C Minor Sonata of opus 35 was published in 1797, and I suspect that it had a great influence on the C Minor Pathétique Sonata of Beethoven, written a short time later. There are no parallel melody lines or harmonic copy, or anything like that. Rather the two share a feeling of intense tragedy and drive, particularly in the first movement. Dussek's second movement is probably the most deeply felt adagio written by any composer up to that point. It is an extraordinary work of beauty and pathos. The last movement is a Czech dance. Dussek never forgot his Czech origins, and throughout his works we find typical Czech dances with the drone base.

ARCHAMBAULT: I am wondering what kind of concert hall Dussek performed in.

MARVIN: In London his concerts were given in the Hanover Square Hall, which was said to seat 1,000 people. This means that the room was quite large, so the carrying power of his instrument must have been strong.

ARCHAMBAULT: What sort of piano was Dussek using in London? Were all European pianos fairly similar at the time?

MARVIN: Dussek played on an English fortepiano. There were
different types of pianos in Europe. The English piano was built along heavier lines than the Viennese or German piano, and its tones were fuller, stronger, more resonant. But the English instrument was hard to play. German and Viennese pianos were far easier to perform on, and their tones were crisp, light, and silvery. Keys on the Viennese pianos could be struck more quickly; they responded more rapidly. Trills and runs were much less of a problem, and the pianist needed only a very light touch. These differences, of course, affected the style of all composers of the period. We have here a clear case of an art form in submission to technology. The construction of the piano dictated the composer's style.

Just as an example, the famous octave glissandos in Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata that plague modern pianists were not at all difficult on the Beethoven piano because the keys were very shallow. Today, with the deeper and heavier mechanical set of the modern piano, the octave glissandos are enormously difficult and cause great problems. Beethoven, by the way, desperately wanted a heavier piano. He was delighted when he finally received a large English Broadwood.

ARCHAMBAULT: You said that Dussek spent ten years in London. What made him leave?

MARVIN: His unfortunate business dealings. Dussek's wife, who was only seventeen when he married her, was the daughter of Domenico Corri, an opera composer and music publisher. After the marriage Dussek went into partnership with her father and created the company of Dussek and Corri Music Publishers, printing Haydn as well as works by Dussek himself. The company should have been successful, except that Dussek and Corri were bad businessmen. By 1799 they were going bankrupt, and to avoid debtors' prison, Dussek fled to Hamburg. However, his father-in-law was incarcerated in Newgate Prison for a short time. Dussek never again saw his wife or daughter Olivia, then two years old.

ARCHAMBAULT: Then the next period in Dussek's life was apparently spent in Hamburg. Can you tell us about the Hamburg years?

MARVIN: When Dussek arrived, he wrote a major work called the Farewell Sonata. Whether or not it was a farewell to London we don't know. The work actually could have been a model for the Les Adieux Sonata by Beethoven ten years later. Dussek's sonata starts with a slow movement, a Grave, whose rhythmic structure is very similar to Beethoven's opening Adagio. Then, like Les Adieux, the sonata goes into an Allegro. Beethoven's second movement has a close affinity to Dussek's second movement; the opening rhythmic figure of sixteenth notes is almost identical. Furthermore, we find a correlation between Beethoven's second theme to the second part of Dussek's lyrical section, in the accompanying bass figure and singing treble line.

ARCHAMBAULT: Are you suggesting that when Beethoven wrote Les Adieux he had seen the score of the Farewell Sonata?

MARVIN: Yes, he had obviously seen it. Dussek's Farewell Sonata was published in 1800, and Les Adieux was not written until 1809.
or 1810. Incidentally, the second movement of the *Farewell Sonata* must have greatly astonished the musical public and may even astonish a modern-day audience with its unexpected key changes and strange dissonances.

ARCHAMBAULT: I assume that Dussek immediately began concertizing in Hamburg.

MARVIN: He was so famous at this point that he began performing at once—for which, incidentally, he was very well paid. Early nineteenth-century artists received high fees if they were well known—$12,000 to $14,000 a performance. And, of course, Dussek was also composing. In 1800 he wrote the great *G Minor Concerto* opus 50, a work I discovered in my research. Actually there are no printed scores of any of Dussek's fifteen piano concertos. The procedure in the concert hall at the time was for the composer to perform the work at the piano and to conduct the orchestra from that position. Separate instrumental parts were published and distributed. I have been able to gather this material and make it into a score, which I intend to publish. I also plan to publish the twenty-nine piano sonatas that were printed in Czechoslovakia in 1963, plus twenty more. As I indicated earlier, the Czechs based their printing of twenty-nine sonatas on the Breitkopf & Haertel edition of 1813–17, but that edition apparently neglected some material. Furthermore, certain sonatas written for piano with violin ad libitum were not then recognized as piano sonatas; and these I will also publish.

ARCHAMBAULT: To return for a moment to the *G Minor Concerto*; do you consider it a masterpiece?

MARVIN: I do. I believe it stands as a monumental edifice of the concerto style. One of the most unusual things about this concerto is its opening. The Ritornello, which is your main tutti, or orchestra introduction, has many themes. They are so intense that one would expect the piano solo to echo and enlarge upon them, to become a variation. But no, the piano plays only seven bars of this material. Most unusual. The main theme is not even played by the piano, except at the end—and then for only a small part of the theme. The first movement flows into a tremendous climax, in wave after wave of modulations. I use the word *wave* because in listening to this movement you have a feeling of the sea; the music just rolls over you. It builds with such intensity that you wonder where it is going to break. Then it subsides gradually into a pedal point that anticipates Beethoven's great *Emperor Concerto*. It is an extraordinary experience to play this concerto of Dussek's even without orchestra.

ARCHAMBAULT: Now that you have gotten together a score of the *G Minor Concerto*, will you be performing it?

MARVIN: I plan on performing it, yes. Actually his last two concertos, this opus 50 and the opus 70, should be presented on one record. So far as I can determine, these works have not been performed in the last hundred years. I tell you frankly, it will be a revelation to hear them.

ARCHAMBAULT: Can you tell us about any other important compositions or concerts by Dussek?

MARVIN: Dussek returned briefly to Czechoslovakia and gave
some concerts, about which we have several written descriptions. Let me read you one by Jan Tomášek, the Czech composer, who wrote about one of the Prague concerts:

There was something magical in the manner in which Dussek, with his graceful appearance, through a wonderful touch, drew from the instrument delicious and at the same time emphatic tones. His fingers were like a company of ten singers who, possessing a perfectly equal technique, produce immediately whatever their master wishes. I never saw the Prague public so enchanted as then by Dussek's splendid playing.

During the Hamburg period Dussek also accepted the patronage of Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia, whom he had met in 1800. The prince was twenty-eight then, and he had come incognito to Hamburg to get away from some of his royal duties and to involve himself with politics, art, and literature in circles that the royal family did not approve of. The prince was leading his own army and was an extraordinary man: a musician of very high caliber, a pianist, a composer. He and Dussek became very close friends. Dussek was appointed music director for the prince's royal household and taught piano and music composition to the prince. Louis Spohr in his autobiography, printed in 1878, tells a story which I will read to you, about the prince and his preparations for musicals to be held during the grand military maneuvers in Magdeburg. Spohr was a violinist and a close friend of Dussek.

Frequently at 6 o'clock in the morning Dussek and I were aroused from our beds and conducted in dressing gown and slippers to the reception salon, where the prince was already seated at the pianoforte in yet a lighter costume, the heat being then very great, and indeed, generally in his shirt and underpants only. Then began the practice and rehearsal of the music intended to be performed in the evening circles; and from the prince's zeal, this lasted so long, that in the meantime the salon was filled with officers decorated and bestarred. The costume of the musicians contrasted then somewhat strangely with the brilliant uniforms of those who had come to pay their respects to the prince. But this did not trouble His Royal Highness in the least; neither would he leave off until everything had been practiced to his satisfaction. Then we finished our toilet in all haste, snatched as hasty a breakfast, and rode off to the review.

There is another story which concerns events on the day before the prince died. On the evening of October 9th, 1806, the prince received orders to prepare his regiment for the next day's battle against Napoleon. That same evening he went to the concert hall to make music. At 11:00 P.M., when the prince prepared to leave, Princess Schwarzburg said to him, “Now you must play on another piano, Prince.” And he answered, “Yes, only dissonances.” The next day the thirty-four-year-old prince, accompanied by Dussek, left for battle and met his death near Saalfeld.

The dedication page of the Pleyel edition of Dussek's Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra opus 63, C.206, documents: “Composed for his late Royal Highness Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia: it was performed by him the very evening before his death at the home of Prince Schwarzburg at Rudolstadt.” The accompaniment for this work was most likely a string quartet—as printed in the Pleyel edition. In memory of Prince Louis, Dussek also wrote the beautiful and moving sonata *Élégie harmonique*. 

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opus 61, C.211, with a deeply felt foreword on the title page:

H.R.H. the Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia remain'd slain on the Field at the Battle of Saalfeld on the 10. October 1806. The Author, who had the exalted honor to live with this most amiable Prince in the most intimate friendship, did not separate himself from him until after he had shed his precious blood for his Country.

ARCHAMBAULT: But now that the prince was dead, Dussek was without a patron. Was he having any difficulties?

MARVIN: He needed money. He had not been paid during his entire tenure with the prince, but of course during those years all his needs were met; food, clothing, drink, which he obviously liked very much—everything was taken care of. After the prince’s death, he went into service with a Prince Isenburg; but that only lasted one year.

Then in 1807 he became music master for the family of Prince Talleyrand, the French minister of foreign affairs, and he remained with them in Paris until his death five years later. During this time he composed less, compared with the London period, but he created on a higher level. The Invocation Sonata and the Return to Paris are from these last years. Dussek also was now performing less in public, probably because he had become very obese, as we can see from pictures.

ARCHAMBAULT: In your opinion, Professor Marvin, what were Dussek’s greatest works?

MARVIN: The Invocation Sonata, the Return to Paris, the Eléige harmonique, the Farewell Sonata, and the Grand Sonata opus 75, C.247—those five, I think, are the greatest sonatas, and they equal in importance and content any sonatas written by any composer during Dussek’s lifetime, including Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven. I must also add the two marvelous piano concertos—the G minor opus 50 and the E-flat Major opus 70—as well as his beautiful piano quartet and quintet. These are all truly great works.

ARCHAMBAULT: Didn’t you do some research on the opening movement of the Invocation Sonata?

MARVIN: Yes. The opening movement has a very close affinity to Smetana’s Moldau, so I decided to look further into the Moldau...
theme. I originally thought it was a Czech folk tune, but I dis-
covered that Smetana took the melody from a Swedish song, Ack
Värmland, du Sköna, written in 1822. This had originally been a
Dutch song called O Nederland! let op u saeck, published in 1626.
The Invocation Sonata was Dussek's last major work—and what a
work! This magnificent sonata boggles the imagination when you
consider the date on which it was written. The second movement,
which is a Minuetto, is a canon on seconds. Its Bach-like purity is
in sharp contrast to the romantic Trio, which can be compared
with Brahms. As you yourself observed earlier, the third move-
ment has a definite lyrical feeling reminiscent of Chopin. The
fourth movement employs dotted rhythms that remind us of
Beethoven's opus 101 and the typical pianistic style of Schumann.
And, of course, the Invocation Sonata predated these other com-
positions.

ARCHAMBAULT: Will we be hearing these works soon in the
Genesis recordings?

MARVIN: I have already recorded sixteen of the sonatas, so the
project is very much on its way.

ARCHAMBAULT: Then you will be the first pianist ever to record
what is considered the full corpus of Dussek's piano sonatas. Is
your mode of interpretation specifically what Dussek intended in
the score, so far as you can determine? Or do you permit a more
personal approach to the music?

MARVIN: As I am a concert pianist as well as musicologist, I tend
to look at the Urtext more carefully. I try to follow every indication
that the composer wanted, although there is sometimes a prob-
lem in dynamic levels because of the piano that Dussek was
writing for. At times I wonder how he was able to perform triple
ppp and triple fff and so many nuances in between on an instru-
ment that lacked the strength and resonance of our pianos today.

I have submerged myself very, very deeply in Dussek's com-
positions, and I know all of the piano works, which is practically
his entire opus. I feel a very close affinity to his music. I under-
stand it completely, I have a strong emotional response to it, and I
feel the same joy and satisfaction in working with this music as I
do with the music of other great composers such as Schumann,
Schubert, or Beethoven. Dussek wrote pianistically virtuoso
works. They are not light or easy because Dussek himself was a
virtuoso of the highest caliber.

ARCHAMBAULT: Let us hope your recordings will restore Dussek
to the level of popularity that he enjoyed in his lifetime. In clos-
ing, I wonder if you would comment on why the nineteenth and
much of the twentieth century seem to have forgotten Dussek.

MARVIN: Perhaps as a protoromantic, anticipating the romantic
school so strongly, Dussek was no longer needed when the
romantic school actually came into flower. That certainly is a
possibility; but we really don't know.

ARCHAMBAULT: We thank you very much, Professor Marvin.
And we look forward to your recordings.