



## INSIDE THE NEW ARTIST MANAGEMENT BUILT FOR COVID TIMES

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Veteran artist manager Doug Sheldon's new company opened for business in October.



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'It never entered my head that I should retire... I couldn't see the point of doing that at all.'

The words of 79-year-old Doug Sheldon, referencing the fact that his Sheldon Artists operation became fully open for business as an artist management in October. Fifty-three years at the giant New York-headquartered Columbia Artists Management (CAMI) by no means sated his enthusiasm for representing musical talent. Not even his decades-long passion for choral conducting is pulling him towards retirement.

'I can't imagine having a richer life than artist management,' Sheldon continues. 'The performing arts are among the great civilising and socialising forces in the world. Working in this field invigorates you intellectually and emotionally. I've met so many talented and capable individuals, made friends with exceptional people in the music industry around the world. Life is about interacting with other human beings, who ultimately inspire and energise you.'

Why then the departure from CAMI in 2019? What exactly cut short that distinguished association through which Sheldon built a formidable reputation as one of the most influential artist managers on the planet, representing a long string of legendary performers? Think the stature of Marilyn Horne, Lorin Maazel and the Beaux Arts Trio. Inevitably the move set the rumour mill grinding. Perhaps emboldened by CAMI's demise last summer – a Covidian casualty – Sheldon is direct and straightforward. 'My leaving had to do with how CAMI's orientation in recent years shifted away from classical artist management towards other genres, into the world of events, entertainment, film and so on. I no longer saw the company as a leader in my area of operation – which, of course, requires a continuous investment of time, energy and money'.

CAMI's collapse had everything to do with that realignment of the company's focus, leaving it critically vulnerable to the virus's withering effect on project-work – most obviously, live events. 'What happened is immensely sad,' says Sheldon. 'Here was a legendary company founded during the Great Depression, when eight managers from different companies realised they needed to work together to survive. The irony is that another great recession – which could end up being *worse* than the Great Depression – led to CAMI's disintegration. Result, quite probably: the emergence of smaller, boutique managements, the nature of which mirror CAMI's origins.'

Sheldon arrived at CAMI in 1966, in his mid 20s. The company had noted his conspicuous success as executive assistant of the New York State-based Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. That success had much to do with his handling of the orchestra's then ('demanding and temperamental') music director, László Somogyi. 'No one wanted to work with him,' Sheldon recalls. 'He once fired me, then re-instated me two hours later! But I loved that experience of working alongside a musician. I didn't really want to accept the offer of a job from Columbia Artists – didn't want to work in New York, full-stop – but there was a disagreement with the orchestra over money. I thought I'd stay at CAMI no more than three years. However, I found working with artists absolutely fascinating – really getting to know them, understanding how they think, figuring out how to be of assistance to them. So, three years became *fifty-three!*'

The terms under which Sheldon left CAMI meant that for a year he was barred from operating as an artist manager; Sheldon Artists nonetheless came into being as a classical music consultancy business before latterly assuming fully fledged artist management form. The boutique company's roster aims at a balanced look, Sheldon explains. 'There are the leading artists with whom I've had long-standing relationships – for example, Anne-Sophie Mutter, Valery Gergiev, the Royal Philharmonic and Mariinsky orchestras. Then a middle group of mature artists like conductor Robert Trevino and violinist Simone Lamsma, who are well on the way to significant careers. Thirdly come the young artists who can look forward to very bright futures, such as Israeli pianist Tom Borrow. And finally, for the first time I represent a composer – the formidable Lera Auerbach'.

Significantly for a smaller-sized operation, Sheldon Artists represents no fewer than three female conductors – Lera Auerbach, Eva Ollikainen and Laurence Equilbey. 'It's time for woman conductors to take their rightful place on the podium,' is Sheldon's observation. And there's a place for what is possibly an innovation in artist management: the company acts as consultant on the development of two violinists of tender years – Paloma So and Matvey Blumin.

Sheldon Artists was always intended to be initially a modest-sized business. As things have turned out, it's tailor-made for the Covid environment, mirroring the growing trend for low-overhead slimmed-down managements in various territories, as a response to the crisis. 'The paradigm for the business has changed completely,' is Sheldon's observation. 'A company the size of CAMI and its leading competitors now looks like an anomaly. Every major artist management in the world has had to downsize.'

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Sheldon Artists' four members of staff all work from home – Sheldon from the Colonia NJ property where he and his wife have lived since 1968. 'We've all agreed to work for nothing for the first six months,' he explains. 'Business meetings happen via Zoom. Phone calls can be made via the internet. There's no travel to fund... That's what I *really* miss, though. This is a person-to-person business. When will that be possible again?'

An investor is said to be waiting in the wings, ready to back this particular vision of post-virus 'new age' artist management. Sheldon adopts a long-term historical perspective to buttress his optimism for the future beyond Covid-19. 'Look at the 1990s. They saw the greatest number of US bankruptcies in history. And yet that decade also saw the greatest number of *new* businesses created.

'This pandemic is breeding entrepreneurship, creativity, new ideas. The image that comes to mind is of the terrible and devastating fires we've had on our west coast. So much forest and vegetation destroyed. But what happens eventually – and quite swiftly? Re-birth and re-growth.'