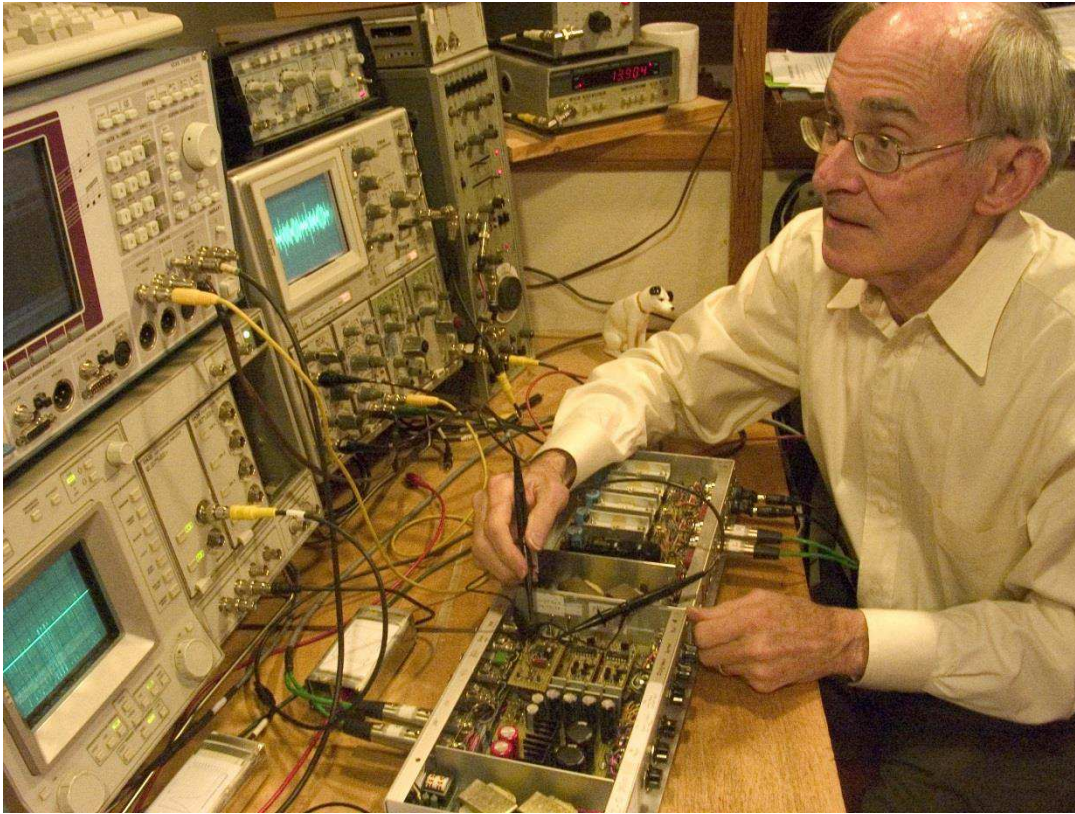


Local record label snags four Grammy nominations



courtesy photo
In the studio with audio legend "Prof" Keith O. Johnson.

By **JEAN BARTLETT** | Pacifica Tribune
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Often referenced as "the best seat in the house," Reference Recordings (RR) is an independent classical, blues and jazz audiophile record label located in Pacifica's Crespi Business Center. On January 28, 2018, members of the RR team will join other Grammy nominees at the 60th Grammy Awards airing live from New York City.

RR is the recipient of four Grammy nominations – two records, two nominations each. "RR-139 Schoenberg: American Symphony; Finding Rothko; Picture Studies" performed by the Kansas City Symphony, conducted by Michael Stern. The album was recorded by Keith Johnson and Sean Martin, nominees for "Best Engineering, Classical." Adam Schoenberg – composer "Picture Studios" – is nominee for "Best Contemporary Classical Composition."

"FR-724 Shostakovich: Symphony No. 5; Barber: Adagio for Strings" performed by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Manfred Honeck. The album was recorded by Mark Donohue from Soundmirror, Boston, and Mark is nominee for "Best Engineering, Classical." The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and conductor Honeck are nominees for "Best Orchestral Performance." Five total U.S. Grammy nominations this year for "Best Engineering, Classical." RR garnered two.

Members of the RR team include: founder/producer J. Tamblyn ("Tam") Henderson, Jr.; founding partner, technical director, recording and mastering engineer "Prof" Keith O. Johnson; executive and managing director Marcia Martin; and recording engineer Sean Martin.

Husband and wife, longtime Pacificans Keith Johnson and Marcia Martin raised their children here.

Sean Martin attended Cabrillo Elementary, Linda Mar Middle School, and Terra Nova and Oceana high schools. His college focus was physics and economics, but he has always been involved in music, performing and recording.

"I am always open to new ways to record/capture music and performances," Sean said. "The goal is making music sound good on multiple playback systems and to multiple people. Digital is currently a great medium for recording music, but I am open to all recording mediums and am a big fan of analog as well."

The RR catalog is vast and there are numerous awards and nominations, including Grammy wins in 2016, 2010 and 2004, and multiple Grammy nominations in between. The first Grammy gold for the 41-year-old company was in 1986.

The RR sound comes from "Prof" Johnson's "singular methods and equipment, almost all hand-built or extensively modified by him. His microphone techniques range from purist to complex, depending on the musical forces and the performing space involved."

"From early childhood, music was an important new experience and technological devices of all kinds were very fascinating to me," Johnson said. "So, in grade school, I learned instruments and began exploring how interesting things were constructed and how they worked. Friends helped me with books and with finding parts that ultimately made up a pretty darned good phonograph. My parents introduced classical music, a piano, and the local drugstore had lots of heavily used 78s from 'juke boxes' which were cheap and much fun to explore. Easy transportation gave access to live concerts at the local radio station. Their playbacks from very good equipment really focused my attention. Just next door, free pipe organ concerts gave more of the intimate great experience well beyond that from the 78s. Then in high school, a Chicago symphony stereo tape introduced me to Hi-Fi stereo. I was overwhelmed by that recording. I found parts and built up my first three-channel recorder. It was a good high school project and just after graduating I made a Red Norvo recording that can be heard from our Reference Recordings catalog."

Ampex Corp learned about the machine and offered Johnson a research-scholarship to Stanford University where he studied engineering science and did advanced work in magnetic film transducers.

"Sherman Fairchild licensed some things I had created and I made live recordings for the Armed Forces Radio. Both created very good experience backgrounds to help make great recordings."

For every recording, Johnson likes a fully and correctly staged "you are there" setting that helps the artist and listener connect.

"I avoid machine sounding technological intrusions from overly-close microphones and added reverberation to cover up their positioning as well as ambient disparities from isolation rooms and baffles," Johnson explained. "Forget about trumpets with a microphone clipped in the horn or for that matter a microphone almost in a vocal mouth, the kind of thing we might encounter among hundreds of thousands of streaming tracks that can quickly disappear from the 'cloud.'"

"The goal of Reference Recordings is to record and release sonically superior recordings of exceptional musicians, performing in outstanding acoustic spaces," Marcia Martin said, "to promote and support our artists, and hopefully thrill music lovers and audiophiles around the world."

Tune into the Grammys, January 28, CBS, 4:30 p.m. PT, and look for members of the RR team. Visit RR at: www.referencerecordings.com.

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courtesy photo

Bottom right, engineer Sean Martin handles playback for the Kansas City Symphony recording.