

# Sony chairman credited with developing CDs dies

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In this May 1991 file photo, former president and chairman of Sony, Norio Ohga, holds a Sony Mini Disc in New York. Sony says Ohga, credited with developing the compact disc, has died Saturday, April 23, 2011. He was 81. Sony Corp. Chairman Howard Stringer said Ohga helped redefine the Japanese manufacturer not only as an electronic hardware company but helped it also expand into software or entertainment. (AP Photo/Richard Drew, File)

(AP) -- Opera singer Norio Ohga complained about the quality of Sony tape recorders before he was hired by the company, developed the compact disc and championed its superior sound. Love of music steered the former Sony chairman's career and in turn, he transformed the

Japanese electronics maker into a global software and entertainment empire.

The company president and chairman from 1982 to 1995, Ohga died Saturday in Tokyo of multiple organ failure, [Sony](#) said. He was 81.

The flamboyant music connoisseur steered his work through his love of music. A former opera singer, Ohga insisted the [CD](#) be designed at 12 centimeters (4.8 inches) in diameter - or 75 minutes worth of music - to store Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in its entirety.

From the start, Ohga recognized the potential of the CD's superior sound quality. In the 1970s, when Ohga insisted CDs would eventually replace record albums, skeptics scoffed. Herbert von Karajan, Stevie Wonder and Herbie Hancock spoke up in defense of Sony's digital sound.

Sony sold the world's first CD in 1982 and CDs overtook LP record sales in Japan five years later. The specifications are still used today and fostered the devices developed since.

"It is no exaggeration to attribute Sony's evolution beyond audio and video products into music, movies and game, and subsequent transformation into a global entertainment leader to Ohga-san's foresight and vision," Sony Corp. Chairman and Chief Executive Howard Stringer said Saturday, using the Japanese honorific.

Some decisions made during Ohga's presidency, such as the \$3.4 billion purchase of Hollywood studios Columbia Pictures, were criticized as unwise and costly at the time. But Ohga's focus on music, films and video games as a way to enrich the electronics business helped create Sony's success in his era.

"We are always chasing after things that other companies won't touch,"

Ohga said in a 1998 interview with The Associated Press. "That is a big secret to our success."

Shattering the stereotype of the staid Japanese executive, the debonair Ohga was never shy, his hair neatly slicked back, his boisterous manner exuding the fiery yet naive air of an artist. His persona added a touch of glamour to Sony's image at a time when Japan had global ambitions.

An experienced pilot, Ohga at times flew the plane himself for business trips. A gourmet, he boasted about his roast beef. His hobby was cruising on his yacht.

Chairman of the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra since 1999, he continued to conduct there a few times a year. In 1993, he conducted the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra at Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall in a charity event funded by Sony.

Ohga often compared leading a company to conducting an orchestra.

"Just as a conductor must work to bring out the best in the members of his orchestra, a company president must draw on the talents of the people in his organization," Ohga said in a 1996 Sony publication.

Sony started amid the destruction and poverty after World War II and built itself on the popularity of transistor radios, the Walkman, the Trinitron TV, the CD - shaping the history of modern electronics.

Ohga had graduated from Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music in 1953 and Berlin University of the Arts in 1957.

He was set to pursue a career as a baritone opera singer when Sony co-founders Masaru Ibuka and Akio Morita, intrigued by his complaints about the sound quality of Sony tape recorders, recruited him to the

company.

He was a Sony executive by his 30s, a rarity in a Japanese company. He was appointed president of CBS Sony Records in 1970, chairman of what later became Sony Corp. of America in 1988, and chief executive of Sony in 1989. He left the day-to-day business in about 2000.

Ohga had tried to lead a double life of artist and Sony man.

One day, he dozed off from exhaustion in the stage wings while waiting to go on in the "The Marriage of Figaro," rushed in from the wrong direction and watched his embarrassed co-stars stifling giggles.

He gave up his opera career but still promoted classical music in Japan by supporting young musicians and concerts.

The company says he was key in building the Sony brand, especially working on design, as well as quality, to make products that looked attractive to consumers.

Sony has encountered difficulty in recent years, falling behind in flat-panel TVs to rivals like Samsung Electronics Co. of South Korea, as well as in digital music players to Apple Inc.

It remains unique in having a Hollywood studio, a [music](#) recording business, and the PlayStation video-game unit, though critics note it has never fully realized the benefits of owning both electronics and entertainment divisions.

Ohga is survived by his wife, Midori. Sony said a private wake will be held later.

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