

DISCS AS A MEDIUM FOR NEW MUSIC

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THE contemporary composer is no longer shunned by the publishers of phonograph records. An encouraging number of important scores, on some of which the ink is hardly dry, have been finding their way to recording studios with unprecedented alacrity. During the past half year several records have actually introduced us to music which had never been heard in this country through any other public agency. *Mathis der Maler*, conducted by Hindemith, became familiar months before an American orchestra first performed it; to date the same composer's *Second String Trio* is known here only by the records of the Goldberg-Hindemith-Feuermann performance; French Columbia microphones relayed Milhaud's *Les Songes* before local program-makers were aware of this delightful ballet's existence; and, finally, the recording of the *Duo Concertant*, by Dushkin and Stravinsky, preceded by a few weeks the arrival here of these artists.

Those who could not make the journey to Pittsfield last Autumn may now listen to the records of the *Trio* composed less than a year ago by Roy Harris. A perfect recording by the Roth Quartet of Harris' *Three Variations on a Theme* has also made its appearance. Furthermore the RCA Victor Company, with a surprising display of confidence, commissioned of this composer a nine-minute orchestral work to occupy both sides of a future Red Seal record. This refreshing directness on the part of a strictly commercial organization not only promises radical methods of publishing new music, but, at the same time, offers in our not always benign machine age, a logical and forward-looking form of musical patronage. The overture on the theme *Johnny Comes Marching Home* may quite easily mark the establish-

ment of a new medium for promoting the appreciation of present-day music.

Not to be outdone by Victor, Columbia pioneered with unusual intrepidity in recording Edgar Varèse's *Ionization*. The detonating components of this Franco-American's high tensioned art may now be widely studied; no longer is it confined to small, initiated metropolitan audiences. The Varèse disc also makes improvements in the recording art strikingly evident. Engraving the tones of forty-one percussion and friction instruments and machines presented peculiar problems which the engineers uncannily succeeded in solving. Varèse's essay in timbres has been admirably perpetuated, and—if available sales reports may be taken as indications—it is being generously circulated.



It is now apparent that the modern composer has in the phonograph the most expeditious medium for reaching a large public. Though private recording enterprises and subscription endeavors are admirable in purpose, such agencies will always find annoying difficulties in distribution, not to speak of prohibitive costs in recording large instrumental ensembles. But now with the current display of interest by the large companies, composers will benefit by their far-flung dealer outlets and technical and artistic resources. There are bound to be problems and set-backs; but in the end the makers of modern music will secure a new independence.

For in the first place, before many years are past the commercial recorders will be compelled to turn to living composers for their raw material. Even now the large bulk of popular nineteenth century music is stored away in needle grooves. Much familiar music from earlier periods has been recorded; the masterpieces of Strauss and Debussy, and all of the important Stravinsky works—except *Mavra*, *Oedipus*, the *Concerto*, the *Sonata* and *Serenade* for piano, and the *Violin Concerto*—are in record libraries. The saturation point is in sight. Another five years of recording at the present rate of activity, and the disc presses will be where the printing presses are today. Duplication of the same works by various publishers will mean diminishing

returns. And the recorded music now available represents too huge an investment for the companies (controlled throughout the world by two great major interests) to consider scrapping present-day methods in favor of sound on film, on tape, or on wire.

Today the search for fresh material has led the recorders to such esoteric works as *Die Kunst der Fuge*, the *Goldberg Variations*, the harpsichord works of Couperin, and Renaissance polyphony. The further back the plunge, the greater will be the interest aroused in contemporary music. Devotees of *La Bataille de Marignan* and music from the far-away chapel of King Henry VI are more likely to follow the course of modern composition than those who love the Franck *D minor Symphony* and all the emotional paraphernalia of the *Ring*. Romantic music to exert its appeal must arouse the emotions. It has been suggested that the place for this is in the concert hall—and there can be little question about it.

On the other hand, Bach, Byrd and Palestrina do not pall upon repeated hearings. Neither, I venture to claim, will *L'Histoire du Soldat*, the *Symphonie de Psaumes*, *Three Variations on a Theme*. The neo-classic trend of today impels writing singularly well-adapted to the peculiar demands of the phonograph in more ways than one. Its architectonic character invites greater enjoyment upon closer study. Inspired works such as the *Goldberg Variations* and *Les Noces* will continue for a long while to reveal much that is moving and beautiful in a purely musical way, just as the little piles of apples and jugs continue to be beautiful and moving after Cézanne has organized their formal meanings in a purely plastic way.