

TEN YEARS OF MODERN MUSIC RECORDING

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A STUDY of contemporary music recorded in the past ten years is of special significance, for one thing because this last decade has seen the creation of a new repertoire of phonograph records. They are made under radically changed conditions for a reproducing machine that no more resembles the original of the species than the modern grand piano does the clavichord. Scarcely ten years ago the first records of Richard Strauss (made in Germany) began to seep into a few choice shops over here; the discovery, in 1922, of an antique version of *Eulenspiegel* aroused rejoicing that a new day had dawned for the disc addict. The gradual acquisition of such things as *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune*, the *Ma Mere l'Oye* suite and the waltzes from *Rosenkavalier* encouraged that belief; but we were now in 1925, and the rate of progress pointed to the fall of 1947 if one were interested in Stravinsky (aside from *L'Oiseau de Feu*), Bartok, Schönberg et al. True, a subscription society in England had, with unprecedented adventurousness, issued the *Verklärte Nacht*; but that was a project that could scarcely go beyond the limits of chamber music.

Then, actually, the dawn burst, with the first records made by the present "electrical" process (a by-product of radio engineering) as opposed to the ancient acoustical method. For the first time the trombone could be heard in the home; and the furniture shook with the impact of an authentic *paukenwirbel*. A fairly adequate representation of a large body of instruments was at last achieved. How long it would take for the devices to become of service in the dissemination of modern music still remained a question. In America, what public existed was diffuse and inarticulate, the companies had not the slightest interest in subsidizing records that would not pay for themselves,

and there were no enthusiastic amateurs. But from England and Germany, rumors began to arise, and soon afterwards, through the enterprise of importers who knew more about their customers' wants than the manufacturers did, the tangible evidence of an infant library developed. Today, there are available in New York City the works of no less than seventy-five living composers, many represented by several characteristic compositions, at least a dozen and a half by the bulk of their output. A listener devoid of any other means of musical experience could obtain a very representative cross-section from this of what is actually being composed at the present time.

Obviously, no startling revolution had occurred in the attitude of the companies toward their merchandise—profit was, and is, the primary consideration. But they had stumbled on a public who had some contact with the living body of music. The basis of the contemporary list is the acceptance by that public of a few composers—Strauss, Debussy, Ravel, Elgar and Stravinsky, all of whom are lumped by the unordered mind as “modern” composers. One can now hear practically the entire repertoire of each of these men on records, with even a choice, in the major orchestral works, of interpretations by various conductors, including several by the composers themselves.

Curiously, sales were encouraging, and the resultant expansion has produced some astonishing results, such as the recording of the first five symphonies of Sibelius; a symphony, concerto and three orchestral suites of Prokofieff; the *Gurre-Lieder*, complete; two quartets of Malipiero; a quartet and two large piano works of Bartok; six major works of Arnold Bax; two of William Walton; a dozen by Delius; a large representation of De Falla and Turina; while the French have transferred Honegger, Schmitt, Milhaud, Roussel, Poulenc, Roger-Ducasse and Ibert to wax in embarrassing profusion. Works by the following composers as well, are available on records in quantities less striking: Bloch, Casella, Dohnanyi, D'Indy, Fabini, Stan Golestan, Hindemith, Holst, John Ireland, Kodaly, Korngold, Krenek, Pizzetti, Respighi, Schreker, Scott, Scriabin, Szymanowski, Vaughn-Williams, Villa-Lobos, Warlock, Wladigeroff.

This selection is made from an exhaustive list that is, of

course, not the result of a plan but the answer to what might be conceived as public demand, and should be compared with the average season or seasons in one of our musical centers. When was the Bartok *Quartet* (opus 7) last played in New York? Or the *Third Symphony* of Sibelius, or the *Façades* of William Walton (if ever) or the Roussel *Symphony in G minor*, or the Schmitt *Dionysiac* or the Hindemith *Quartet in C*, or the Bax *Mediterranean*—or, what is more to the point, when will they be played again? The recordings are in every instance of excellent quality, the instrumental reproduction is scarcely short of mirror-like duplication. The recording companies unwittingly perhaps have done more for modern music than most of the organized agencies of musical performance. In several important instances, they have even anticipated, with records on sale, the public performance here of new works from abroad, such as the *Symphonie des Psaumes*, the *Capriccio* and *Apollon Musagète* of Stravinsky, the Ravel *Piano Concerto*, the Respighi *Triptych* after Botticelli, de Falla's harpsichord *Concerto*, Lambert's *Rio Grande*, the *Lark Ascending* of Vaughn-Williams, without mentioning a host of other, older works that have not yet been played in our concert-halls. Even today, if a New Yorker wants to hear what the Strauss orchestra of *Salome* sounds like, the only way to save an ocean trip is to consult the recordings.

To the place occupied by American products in this compilation, of either records, or works of native origin, it is not possible to point with pride. One man has pursued, so far as permitted him, a valorous course, Leopold Stokowski. To his credit are the first records of the *Sacre*, the only *Gurre-Lieder*, the Scriabin *Prometheus* and *Poème de l'Extase*, as well as a number of more familiar works by Debussy, Stravinsky and Strauss. Serge Koussevitzky's experiences with the phonograph are more recent, and consequently, less numerically imposing, but his contributions from Prokofieff, Ravel and Stravinsky are important. Frederic Stock records with the Chicago Symphony only occasionally, and his choice in modern works has not gone beyond Dohnanyi and early Sibelius. The Philharmonic has made under various conductors some of the finest present-day recordings, including *Don Quixote* and *Ein Heldenleben*, and

the only complete recording extant of a major orchestral work by an American composer, Ernest Schelling's *Victory Ball*.

This brings us neatly to the point toward which this discussion has been directed. Is it not a travesty on our musical culture that the name of Schelling should stand in unaccompanied eminence in so important a field of our musical life? There is, to be sure, an album from Carpenter's *Skyscrapers* but who will pretend this makes the situation more endurable? A full dozen English composers are adequately represented, as many Frenchmen, almost as many Germans and a proportionate number of Italians. Almost all of this recording has been done in their own countries where, occupying a substantial position in the musical life of their fellows, they have affiliated themselves with the phonograph. In America, no such tendency is discernible. The impetus for recording the works of English composers came through the National Gramophonic Society, with which many composers and musicians were actively identified. They recorded their own works for subscription sale, arousing an interest the commercial companies were quick to seize on and capitalize. Is it not time for a similar movement in this country that we may convince the phonograph's supporters, unquestionably the most alert and intelligent section of the visible public, that we possess work of equal merit and demonstrate to the controlling executives that there is a public, possibly small, but nevertheless potent, which is convinced of the merit of our own composers?

The phonograph must be recognized today as an ally, an invaluable one, for the fostering of a sympathetic and an aware audience. The criticism most frequently leveled against modern music is the difficulty of appraising it at a single hearing. We applaud the daring of an interpreter who performs a new work twice on the same program. Why not infinitely augment the effect of performance and publishing by making records played by artists specially qualified to illuminate such works? Why not solicit the interest of a public predisposed toward experiment? These are considerations to which American composers, and those interested in a vital American music must devote themselves.