

THE RECORD REVIEW

BACH: PASSION ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW. Boston Symphony Orchestra, Serge Koussevitzky, conducting, assisted by the Harvard University Glee Club and Radcliffe Choral Society, G. Wallace Woodworth, conducting, and Soloists (Victor M, AM 411, 412, 413; 3 vols., 27 records, \$20.00, \$15.00, \$18.00).

BACH: ORGAN MUSIC. Preludes, fantasias, toccatas, fugues, and chorale-preludes played by Albert Schweitzer (Columbia sets 270, 310, 320; 3 vols., 21 records, \$14.00 each).

BACH: SONATAS NOS. 5 AND 6 FOR FLUTE AND FIGURED BASS. Rene Le Roy, flute; Albert-Leveque, harpsichord; Lucien Kirsch, cello (Musicraft album 16; 4 records, \$6.50).

WAGNER: EXCERPTS FROM "PARSIFAL." Leopold Stokowski & the Philadelphia Orchestra (Victor M, AM 421; 4 records, \$8.00).

BACH: CONCERTO IN C MAJOR FOR TWO PIANOS AND ORCHESTRA. Artur & Karl Ulrich Schnabel, pianos, & the London Symphony Orchestra, Sir Adrian Boult, conducting (Victor M, AM 357; 3 records, \$6.50).

In the St. Matthew Passion we find some of Bach's most glorious music. Parts of it have been recorded previously, but this is the first full-length version of the work on discs. The recording was cut at an actual performance in Symphony Hall, Boston, on Good Friday of last year. It was to be expected that certain defects would result in the records, which were made under circumstances that made retaking impossible. These defects — principally in the form of poorly chosen cut-offs at the end of some surfaces, distortion of the balance between the voices and orchestra, extraneous hall noises, unevenness of the dynamic line, and some unfortunate singing from both chorus and soloists — are not serious enough in a consideration of the entire Passion to make Bach's music any less overwhelming.

For three and one half hours there is scarcely a dull minute. The music is always building up toward the intense dramatic climax. From the Conspiracy, through the Passover, the Last Supper,

the Betrayal, the Crucifixion, and the Death of Christ, to the Burial, there is a constant accumulation of emotions, which becomes all the more absorbing as the music progresses. Add to this the fact that there are portions of the recording which are technically excellent, and the importance of the recording begins to assume form.

Some of the solo singing is poor, and the enunciation on the whole is appalling. But at the same time there are passages like the contralto aria, "O Pardon Me, My God," which are paragons of beauty. As a unit the performance is spirited, and Bach's inspiring music comes through, even though it must be added in all fairness that Dr. Koussevitzky's interpretation and the group singing are often ragged. For all its shortcomings, the Passion still stands out as one of the significant achievements in recorded literature and takes its place beside such exceptional endeavors as the foreign "Society" albums.

COLUMBIA's contribution to the Bach heritage consists of the first three volumes of organ music played by Dr. Schweitzer, an eminent authority on Bach interpretation. Released during the last few months, the first and third volumes contain several profound examples of Bach's absolute music, and the second volume includes thirteen chorale-preludes. The first volume was recorded at All Hallows Church, Barking by the Tower, London; the others were made at Ste. Aurelie, Strasbourg. Columbia and Dr. Schweitzer, I believe, prefer the French organ. Even if one may discount the fact that the first volume is inferior in recording to the latter two — especially to the third — it is easy to explain the penchant for the French instrument. Its tone is brighter and far more sonorous, and it yields more graciously to the majesty of Bach's music.

The music is correctly, if not always inspiringly, played by Dr. Schweitzer. It is good to see the improvement in recording technique in the third volume. If more volumes are added, I hope that something will be done to remove the surplus resonance. These records come from English Columbia originally, and, like all sets from that source, they are accompanied by scholarly analytic brochures on Bach's organ music.

MUCH can be said on both sides about the value of adding the cello part to Bach's last two flute sonatas, as Musicraft has done for the first time, on records at least. Some may feel that it makes the figured bass too preponderant. Others may find that it rounds out the fullness of the harmony. For my part, I like it very much, if only because of the richness of color which emerges from the blending of the harpsichord and cello timbre, even more

effective when juxtaposed to the flute.

M. Le Roy strives for purification in his tone. He seems to unemotionalize Bach. This is a laudable achievement, if it works, and in the long run he comes out ahead. But there is such a thing as overpurification, the point at which the playing becomes colorless and dry. Compare, for example, M. Le Roy's tone with that of Georges Laurent, who recorded some of the flute sonatas some seasons back for Columbia. As infinitely superior as are Musicraft's records to Columbia's older ones, technically speaking in this case, so much the more could M. Le Roy's performance be enhanced by M. Laurent's warm, round tone. That the flute sounds well with the cello and harpsichord almost goes without saying. The technical end of the recording is very fine, another indication of the fact that Musicraft knows how to make good surfaces. The residues are getting less and less, and it is hoped that in time they will disappear altogether.

FOR those who were unable to hear the seasonal performance of "Parsifal," there is some compensation quantitatively and more qualitatively in the Prelude and Good Friday Spell pressed on Victor records. In this set, the Philadelphia Orchestra is at a lustrous level. Its vibrant, passionate tone is revealed in all its dazzle, and Mr. Stokowski seems to make the most of some of Wagner's supreme music. Both excerpts are an amazing paradox of religiosity, a combination of devoutness and lust. Mr. Stokowski makes his orchestra penetrate to the very core of the emotions in the music and expose them in white heat. Victor does its job on the whole quite grandiosely; every subtle nuance comes out clearly, and the loud brass passages are articulate and resonant. Were it not for some needle scratch on two of the surfaces, this recording might claim consideration as one of Victor's finest products.

NOT so the Bach Double Concerto. The Schnabels play in good style, and, although the elder Schnabel has often been called Beethoven's prophet, both he and his son can make Bach's music and make it impressively. The slow movement is played without accompaniment, providing ample opportunity for some excellent pianism from both musicians. But the records are poorly made. There is altogether too much rumbling going on during the performance, and the residue and needle scratch are too pronounced. Also, in the parts in which the soloists and the orchestra are moving simultaneously, one finds too much muddiness. And there is considerable room for improvement in recording the tone of the piano.

ARTHUR WALLACE HEPNER

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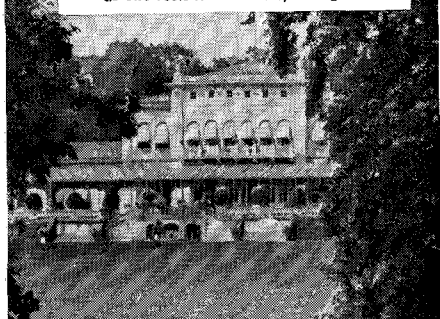
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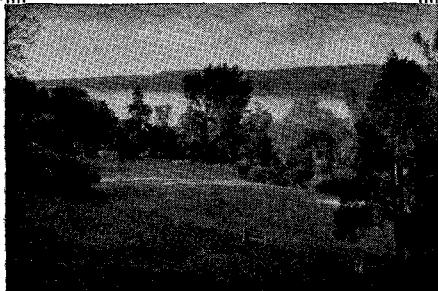
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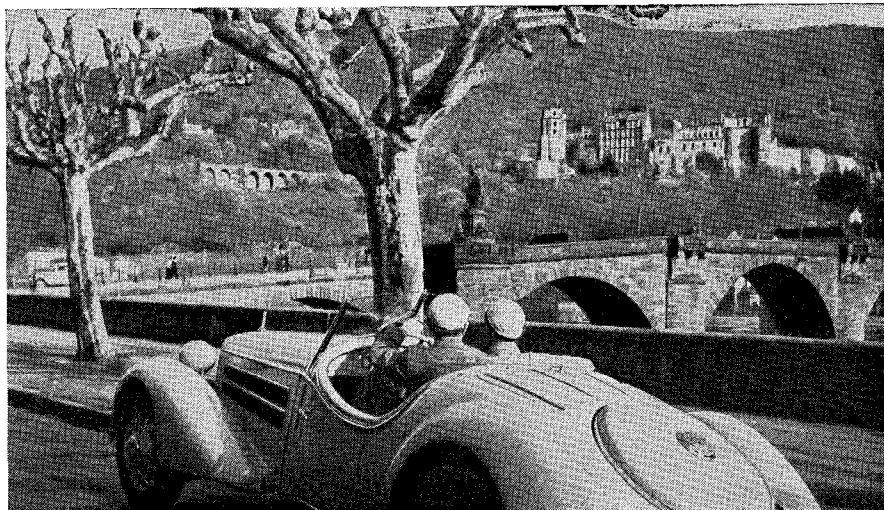
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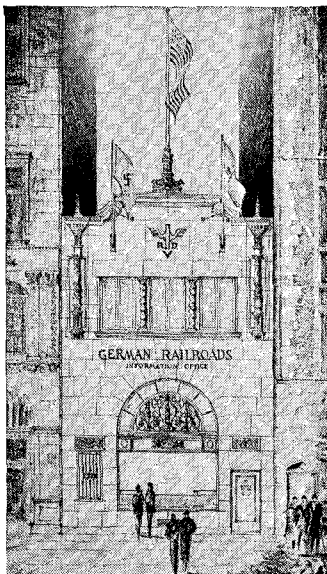


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