

Musical Celebrations

For Tidings of Comfort and Joy

ROLAND GELATT

CAROLS ASIDE, there is not a great deal of music specifically addressed to the celebration of Christmas. Consequently we keep hearing the same pieces at this time of year. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* comes immediately to mind as a herald of the season. Handel's *Messiah* has done Christmas duty for more than two centuries. And in the past decade Berlioz's *L'Enfance du Christ*, a cantata about the infant Jesus, has been rediscovered as similarly worthy of Christmas time. The last two works have recently been made available in new recordings.

When *L'Enfance du Christ* met with unqualified success at its first performance in December, 1854, Berlioz took a characteristically mordant view of his good fortune. The praise heaped on the new work was, he thought, "insulting to its elder brothers." And to his friend Liszt he wrote: "I have become a good little boy, human, clear, melodic. I am at last writing music like everybody else."

A particle of truth hides behind the irony of this last remark. *L'Enfance du Christ* contains the most predictable, the most "normal" music Berlioz ever wrote. And today, as a century ago, it is enthusiastically applauded by those who have little sympathy with the composer's other music. It occupies the same position relative to Berlioz's lifework that *Die Meistersinger* does to Wagner's. Even Wagnerphobes will admit to a sneaking admiration for *Die Meistersinger*, and listeners who are at heart unresponsive to the Berlioz idiom find it possible to relish *L'Enfance*.

ONE must point this out in order to put the current vogue for the work in reasonable perspective. Today, *L'Enfance du Christ* has become runner-up to the *Messiah* as a Christmas musical offering. But it does not, for all its popularity, represent

Berlioz at his greatest. Nowhere does it attain the poetic fervor of the "Scène d'Amour" in *Romeo*, the dramatic urgency of *Harold in Italy*, the somber grandeur of the *Requiem*. To say this is not to disparage the tender, seraphic quality of Berlioz's "sacred trilogy" or to minimize the artistry and craftsmanship with which he depicts the events of Christ's childhood. It is merely to suggest that Berlioz reached his heights when writing music like nobody else.

Up to now the listener in search of a recorded *L'Enfance* has been faced with a dilemma. Either he had



to choose a good French performance under the baton of André Cluytens, vitiated by uneven recording (Vox), or a good American recording of a rather soggy performance conducted by Thomas Scherman (Columbia). Now technology and musicianship meet in a new recording on two LPs by the Boston Symphony, the New England Conservatory Chorus, and four accomplished vocal soloists under the di-

rection of Charles Munch (RCA Victor LM 6053). Perhaps its finest asset is the quality of the orchestra itself, which has been shaped by Munch into an instrument peculiarly sensitive to the colorations and inflections of Berlioz's music. Throughout the score, whether they hold the spotlight during an orchestral interlude or merely weave *sotto voce* arabesques in an accompaniment, the Boston instrumentalists never fail to be eloquent. A captious listener might find Cesare Valletti's Narrator too Italianate in style and the sibilants of the chorus too obtrusive, but in total the new recording of *L'Enfance du Christ* is an interpretative achievement that will be hard to surpass.

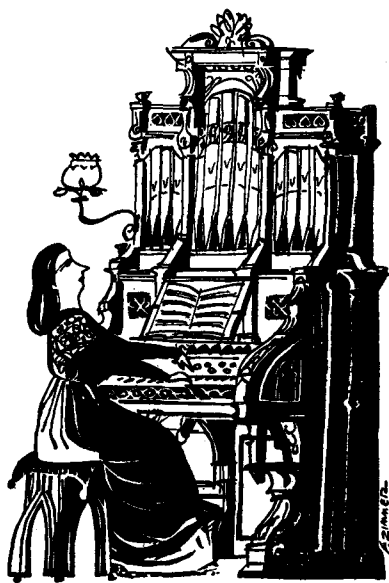
HANDEL'S *Messiah*, of course, is still the prime Christmas favorite: freshly made recordings seem to be issued with almost annual regularity. This year's new version is under the command of Leonard Bernstein, and his forces comprise the New York Philharmonic and the Westminster Choir, with Adele Addison, Russell Oberlin, David Lloyd, and William Warfield as soloists (Columbia M2L-242).

Technically, the recording outranks its eight predecessors in the LP catalogue. Massive choruses, probably the most difficult of all musical sounds to reproduce properly, sparkle here with wonderful clarity even in the loudest passages. Bernstein's is also the cheapest of the good recorded *Messiahs*, inasmuch as it occupies only two LPs instead of the three or four required for competing editions. In part this compression is owing to Columbia's skill in squeezing a sizable quantity of music onto the face of a record without accompanying loss of fidelity; in part it is because Mr. Bernstein has made some substantial cuts. (The latter are more or less standard in the concert hall and will be regretted mainly by the devout Handelian; most listeners find an uncut *Messiah* something of a trial.) Moreover, the new Columbia recording possesses in countertenor Russell Oberlin the most meaningful and musical exponent of the solo alto part on records. It is startling at first to hear a male voice, even an incredibly high one, sing "O Thou

That Tellest Good Tidings"; but one quickly adjusts to it and discovers that Oberlin's pure phrasing and light attacks are infinitely preferable to the Katisha-like "expression" in which traditional oratorio contraltos are wont to indulge.

So much for the points of clear superiority in the latest recorded *Messiah*. Add to them Bernstein's unstodgy approach to the music—vivacious in the joyous passages, intense in the sorrowful ones, never mechanically tied to worn traditions—together with his employment of instrumentation basically that of Handel's day, and the sum is a recording of undeniable quality. But it must vie with the celebrated recording of Hermann Scherchen's issued by Westminster almost three years ago (XWN 3306). The two performances have much in common. Both employ musical forces of proper eighteenth-century proportions and both attempt to rechannel the *Messiah* away from the old Victorian oratorio style. Either album would make a worthy addition to any *Messiah*-less record collection.

MY PREFERENCE, however, still lies with the performance led by Scherchen. His rhythmic sense is crisper, his ear for balance more discerning, and his phrasing more imaginative. These qualities seem to me to compensate for the higher price and the somewhat less resplendent sound of the Westminster recording.



The Casement Case

DANIEL GREENBERG

THE ACCUSING GHOST OF ROGER CASEMENT, by Alfred Noyes. Citadel Press. \$3.50.

ROGER CASEMENT, A NEW JUDGEMENT, by René MacColl. Norton. \$5.

Sir Roger Casement, however sincere an Irish patriot he may have been, spent most of his adult life in the British consular service and won his knighthood, as well as universal acclaim, for a series of reports he had issued on the barbarous ill-treatment of native laborers in the Congo and in the rubber jungles of Peru. But from 1905 on, Casement had also been dabbling in the Irish Nationalist movement—secretly until 1913 (when he resigned from the Foreign Office) and overtly thereafter. In 1914, just before the outbreak of war, he went to the United States, made contact with Irish Nationalists there, and set about raising money for arms. He then proceeded to Germany, and on an evening in April, 1916, a German U-boat put Roger Casement ashore on the southwestern coast of Ireland. Captured and brought to trial in London, he was found guilty of having spent a year and a half in Germany trying to organize Irish prisoners of war into a turncoat brigade, and he was hanged for high treason.

Casement's story is retold briefly but with a great deal of sympathy by the British poet Alfred Noyes; it is told in greater detail but without comparable sympathy by René MacColl, a British journalist.

ONE OF THE paradoxes in the Casement affair is the fact, brought out by both Mr. Noyes and Mr. MacColl, that what the man had *done* scarcely mattered. At the time of his apprehension he did not command a following in Ireland; his recruiting efforts in Germany had been a dismal failure; and he had undertaken his remarkable visit to Ireland, he explained, not to help lead the Easter Rebellion but actually to prevent it. (The Germans could not be trusted to send enough aid.) Yet Casement was popularly associated

with and blamed for the Dublin rising, and an example had to be made of him.

It was after his trial that a resolution asking for clemency came before the United States Senate—a resolution clearly attributable to the large number of Irish-American voters. Britain was at this time wooing the United States, and a misunderstanding between the two countries had to be prevented. Yet neither the imminent passage of the Senate resolution nor the remarkably large number of petitions then arriving at Whitehall (petitions signed by, among others, Shaw, Conan Doyle, and G. K. Chesterton) appear to have softened any hearts in the Asquith cabinet.

QUITE THE CONTRARY, if the events that followed are taken at face value. For while Casement's appeal was under consideration, typewritten and photographed excerpts from a set of rather obscene diaries (or from a diary—there seems to be some confusion on this point) began to reach the eyes of influential persons on both sides of the Atlantic. These diaries, it was claimed, had been found in Casement's London rooms, and if they were genuine they proved Casement to be not only a practicing homosexual but an uncommonly enthusiastic one. They did not prevent the Senate from passing its resolution but they did succeed in vastly reducing the number of signatures on Casement petitions.

Mr. Noyes devotes the greater part of his book to proclaiming, if not quite proving, that the diaries were spurious; Mr. MacColl, who remains objective throughout, is satisfied as to their genuineness. But the first writer is certain, and the latter strongly suspects, that British government agents used the diaries in a calculated attempt to smear Casement, particularly in the United States. Interestingly enough, no subsequent British government has ever been willing to discuss their authenticity.