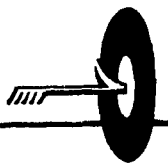


HITS AND MISSES



THOUGHTS on popular songs and singers, suggested by this month's batch of light records:

A popular song, like any other, sounds natural and unforced only when sung within a certain range of tempi. The range, of course, differs for different songs, but in general if a song is sung too rapidly its proper mood never gets established, while if the tempo is too slow the song seems turgid, strained, and the absurd is never far distant. When a singer drones out "S-o-m-e-b-o-d-y l-o-o-o-v-e-s- m-e" in a sticky adagio, the listener's irreverent response is apt to be "So what?"

The mucilaginous tempo is a besetting sin of popular music today. The sentimental side of that music has been getting slower and slower until it threatens to stop altogether. This may be pleasing to dancing couples who like to rock slowly together with their eyes closed, but if one is not rocking with his eyes closed the accompanying musical pace is trying indeed. It is bad enough when adopted by bad singers for bad songs, and especially annoying when an agreeable artist like Woody Herman applies it to the aforesaid classic, "Somebody Loves Me" (Columbia 37820, 75¢). Even so, Herman's singing has, as usual, so much healthy musicality—there is nothing maudlin or epicene—that he almost redeems his dirge-like tempo.

The matter of popular song phrasing also invites comment. A line of verse can be phrased naturally, colloquially—as, say, Mildred Bailey customarily does it—or it can be stretched out of natural shape for some fancied artistic effect. Perhaps no popular singer has indulged in more such distortion, and has had more imitators, than Billie Holliday. Miss Holliday is obviously a singer of feeling, and a striking thing to look upon, but her music has always been spoiled for this listener by her monotonous phrasing habit—and so has the music of others who have apparently gone to Miss Holliday's school. This month it is Sarah Vaughan, who offers one new song, "Lover Man," and three old ones, "I'm Through with Love," "Penthouse Serenade," and "I've Got a Crush on You" (Musicraft 499, 505, 80¢). The Holliday method is not so obvious here as it is with some other singers, but it mars a warm, vigorous, attractive talent.

Certain questions of interpretation

also come to mind. If there is one thing quite clear about popular songs it is that even the best of them are not, like the German *lieder*, richly charged emotional utterances. When the lyricist of "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes" wrote

*Now laughing friends deride
Tears I cannot hide*

he scarcely expected anyone to choke up with feeling.

All this being so, it is clearly a mistake to sing popular songs as though they were poetically high powered, to bear down on such ideas as



Billie Holliday . . . "a striking thing to look upon."

I'm with you once more under the stars

And down by the shore there's an orchestra playing

as though it were the poetry of Grillparzer. In romantic numbers the finest popular singers, such as Bing Crosby and Mildred Bailey, have always, in effect, sung the tune, using the words merely as its vehicle. They give you the melody to carry in your head and make what romantic use of you will; they do not attempt to involve either themselves or you in the verbalisms of the song.

These considerations are pointed up by four of the most interesting sides of the month. They are light American favorites sung by the Continental café star, Greta Keller, on English Deccas, sold by Haynes-Griffin of New York City. Miss Keller is a finished artist with a fine contralto voice, and when she keeps her dis-

tance from the song's words, as in Kern's "The Touch of Your Hand" (M.607, \$1.05) and Rodgers's "Falling in Love with Love" (M.608, \$1.05) she gives appealing versions of those works; but when she leans a little too cozily into the sentiments, as in "The Very Thought of You" (M.608) and "Easy to Love" (M.607) the results are on the lush side.

The month affords a splendid example of how differently it is possible to treat the same popular song with complete success. Revivals are offered of two of the finest versions of "Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams"—that of Bing Crosby (Decca 25193B, 79¢) and of Louis Armstrong (Columbia 37808, 79¢). The Crosby record is a prize example of popular musical delivery, as natural and delectable as the breeze; while the Armstrong work is full of the master trumpeter's



Greta Keller "leans a little too cozily into the sentiments."

most warmly melancholy invention.

If the foregoing strictures on popular music suggest that the month's gifts are scarce, the suggestion is correct. The comedian Danny Kaye proves to have a pleasant straight barbershop voice in "I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now" (Decca 24110A, 79¢). An album of radio "Theme Songs" (Columbia C140, \$3.75) contains two of this page's favorites, Claude Thornhill's "Snowfall" and Xavier Cugat's "My Shawl." Ella Fitzgerald, of Harlem, does an extremely robust job of scat (wordless) singing in "Oh Lady Be Good" and "Flying Home" (Decca 23956, 79¢); in her succession of stomp-rhythmic syllables I discovered musical references not only to various colored syncopators, reboppers, and otherwise, but also to "Martha," John Philip Sousa, "Dardanella," "Yankee Doodle," and "Horses."

WILBUR HOBSON.

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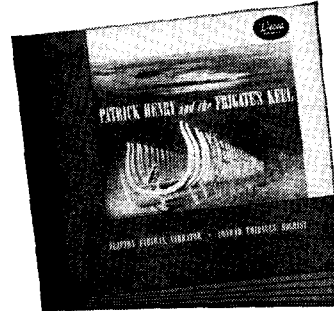
OUR COMMON HERITAGE. Great historic poems read by Bing Crosby, Brian Donlevy, Walter Huston, Fredric March, Agnes Moorehead, and Pat O'Brien. 16 sides. 10 in. No. A-536. \$10.



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SEPTEMBER 27, 1947

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Reviews of the Month

Beethoven and Bach, Berlioz and Borodin are the B's honored by current releases. Parched Mozartians may refresh themselves with a deluge of three concerted works, all great, all gratefully welcome. Note, too, a Stravinsky "first time" and Tchaikovsky, Ravel issues which might, but aren't likely to be, last times.

BEETHOVEN: *Concerto in D for violin, played by Joseph Szigeti with Bruno Walter conducting the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra.* (Columbia album 697, \$6.10).

There are so many occasions when the complacent critic carps, with cause, that the editorial cap should be ceremoniously doffed to Columbia for doing the ideal thing in its re-issue of the Beethoven concerto. Joseph Szigeti has been assigned to replace his own old inimitable one, with the benefits of current recording to make it an even more vital thing than it was before. And with Sir Thomas Beecham, his former collaborator, out of reach, no more sympathetic or qualified choice of a conductor could be made than Bruno Walter.

For the soul-searchers who contemplate their Heifetz-Toscanini albums and wonder what to do: Keep them, by all means, for there are things to be heard in them, especially in Toscanini's dissection of the orchestral score, which are not likely to be heard from another performance in our time. But, if you can, possess this one too, for its heavenly blend of poise and eloquence, fastidious violin playing and heartwarming musicianship. Szigeti is no Heifetz—who is?—but he is, unquestionably, Szigeti.

Finally, the sound generated in Carnegie Hall and brought to life on these discs is a far richer, suaver thing than the penetrating edge to which Heifetz and Toscanini sharpened their fencing-match in Studio 8H.

MOZART: *Concerto in B Flat (K.450), with Kathleen Long, piano, and Boyd Neel conducting the National Symphony Orchestra.* (Decca album EDA 25, \$7.35.) *Concerto in E Flat (K.495), with Dennis Brain, horn, and the Halle Orchestra directed by an unnamed conductor.* (Columbia album X-285, \$3.) *Quintet in A, with Reginald Kell, clarinet, and the Philharmonia Quartet.* Columbia album M-702, \$5.10.)

Anyone of these would be a month's boon, but the three together pose but

one problem: the budgetary. Each is a first-rate specimen of the composer's art, the interpreter's skill and the engineer's craft. I give precedence to Miss Long's playing of the superb B flat concerto for it is a running spring of creative inspiration, with an interchange of ideas which becomes, at times, almost verbal. Moreover, it has been available before only in a long outmoded performance by Elly Ney and Willem Van Hoogstraaten. Anyone looking for a starting point for a journey through the twenty-odd concertos of Mozart could do worse than to begin with this one, and work back. FFRR at its best, and uncommonly quiet surfaces.

One expects the pure Mozart in a piano concerto, or one for violin; but it is staggering to contemplate how he has impressed his own personality on his writing for such outlandish instruments as the bassoon, the clarinet, the flute, or the present horn concerto. In this, the last of four he wrote for the instrument, the flood of beautiful music makes one almost oblivious to the limitations of the horn, the enormous virtuosity required

to make it sound as well as it does here. Dennis, son of the horn-playing Brain family, performs remarkably, and the anonymous conductor (not specified in the English release either) has no reason for his modesty. The rich tones of Brain are all there on the disc.

Of equal distinction is Reginald Kell's work with the favorite clarinet quintet, in which the excellent Philharmonia Quartet makes its American debut. This is easily the superior of the previous offerings here—the Bellison-Roth and the Goodman-Budapest—not only for the clarity and mellowness of Kell's execution and the hair-spring balance with the quartet, but also for the high finesse with which all this has been reproduced. A noble work, nobly served.

STRAVINSKY: *Dumbarton Oaks Concerto, for Chamber Orchestra, conducted by the composer.* (Album Keynote DM 1, \$3.94.)

Dumbarton Oaks, site of the organizational meeting of the United Nations in Washington, deserves a better esthetic memento than this caustic, hard-to-hear piece. The association is pure accident, of course, for the music was written in 1938; but there is little question which thing most of us would prefer to have endure longer.

Nor is there much doubt of the probabilities. A shiny, intricate piece of musical engineering, the "Dumbarton Oaks Concerto" is built on the lines of the eighteenth-century Concert Grossi; but it is not even "of the



"Don't you know any up-to-date stuff like 'The Jersey Bounce'?"