

Looking Backwards— Conchita Supervia

IT WOULD seem that Spain holds a particular fascination for those who have never set foot south of the Pyrenees. We all know of the composers, French and Italian, who have celebrated Spain *in absentia*, avoiding the tangible land lest its mundane self belie the sorcery of its music. Yet for every one composer there must be a thousand listeners whose pulses quicken at the mere thought of anything Iberian, to whom the rhythm of a jota, a fandango, a habanera spells an elusive enchantment.

To such apostles the records of Conchita Supervia are among the greatest joys which the phonograph has bestowed. The mezzo-soprano, whose life ended so tragically and so prematurely in 1936, embodies that which we regard as the quintessence of the Spanish temperament: passion, volatility, verve, and—above all—a somberness, a murkiness of utterance which underlies all she essays. Unfortunately, and inexplicably, it is in the domain of Spanish music that Supervia is today most scantily represented on records. The Spanish Odeon catalogue probably retains the little songs, such as “Clavelitos” and “Ay-Ay-Ay,” which Supervia performs with such graceful and lilting perfection—but, since some impenetrable barrier stands between Spain and the avid discophile across the ocean, this does us no good. English Parlophone, our only current source of Supervia waxings, has not seen fit to list “trivia” of this order in their current catalogue. But we must take our blessings as they come and commend this company for keeping available two important recordings made by the singer in England shortly before her death: Manuel de Falla’s “Seven Popular Spanish Songs” and the song cycle “Tonadillas” by Granados.

The Falla set, Supervia’s most celebrated recording, remains one of those definitive interpretations for which a reasonable facsimile is unthinkable. The three records offer the gamut of Supervia’s amazing range, from her nasal top notes to those deep, startling chest tones which so resemble the quality of a male voice. Here it might be well to mention the objections of some purists to Supervia’s tremolo. Or should we have said vibrato? Devotees of *bel canto* can argue the definition of the two terms endlessly without getting further than that a

vibrato is pleasant, a tremolo unpleasant. Whatever the definition, the objections—though perhaps well founded from a strictly pedagogical standpoint—are quite meaningless when viewed in the light of Supervia’s total accomplishment. We should hesitate to underwrite a “wobble” of this magnitude in most singers; with Supervia it is so much a part of her style, so integral a facet of her interpretations, so electrifying in power and brutality that to deny its artistic validity would be to follow directly in the footsteps of Beckmesser. For the collector who wishes to sample the art of Supervia, for those who love Spanish rhythms and the sound of Spanish consonants, indeed, for anyone who aspires to a collection of recorded masterpieces, this album of Falla songs is a necessity.

Of Supervia’s several Rossini recordings there is less cause for superlatives. Here the character of the music, so alien to our concept of expressive vocal writing, stands in the way of untempered admiration. Perhaps the Swan of Pesaro can still win converts; perhaps all those roulades and cadenzas, the agile shakes, the strategically placed crescendos add up, for some, to a satisfying esthetic experience. This listener confesses that he can enjoy these arias only as period pieces. What is more, Supervia’s Rossini records evidence the singer’s one shortcoming: which is a tendency to pile one vocal effect upon the other with little or no respite. However unerringly she shapes the contours of

a phrase (and Supervia bows to none as an instinctive musician), however artfully she varies the coloration of each word, there is an intensity to some of her work, an unremitting barrage of vocal hortatory which cannot help in time but weary the listener. One longs, every so often, for a valley better to survey the peaks. Half a dozen Rossini discs are extant in the Parlophone catalogue (“Una voce poco fa” among them), of which each pays about equal musical dividends.

There remain the records of “Carmen.” It has been called the perfect opera, and certainly its vitality and power of expression manage to survive the most insipid of performances. Imagine, then, how “Carmen” flourishes in the hands of an interpreter whose vocal prowess and command of the Spanish idiom is such as Supervia’s. Happily, she has recorded every important aria and duet from the opera, and Parlophone has obliged by maintaining them all in the catalogue. Made in France some two decades ago, these records yet stand as touchstones for the role. Who else has sung the Act II “Chanson bohème” with such subtle flexibility of tempo, such superb mastery of rhythm? It was Wanda Landowska, no mean practitioner of the art herself, who said that Conchita Supervia’s feeling for rhythm was of an unsurpassed virtuosity.

The quality of recording? These articles will make a wide detour around any questions of technical achievement. Great recorded performances are not to be measured in terms of decibels or frequency response. Given the basic aural ingredients and an interpretation of genius, a receptive ear will piece out the rest.

Let me end on a philosophical note. A strong temptation exists among any record devotee to overvalue the work of a departed artist. One grows up with a record and it becomes assimilated. We cherish a long-familiar record and leap to its defense. This is all very well so long as we do not, at the same time, shut our ears to new musical experiences and differing interpretations. I hope this series never indulges in the foolish notion that “such singing (or conducting or playing) will never be heard again.” Great artistry is not limited to yesteryear. And just to set the proper note, I shall mention a young, contemporary Spanish singer whose records are every bit as exciting as Supervia’s. Her name is Victoria de los Angeles, and she records for HMV. Hispanophiles, take notice!

—ROLAND GELATT.



—Culver Service.

Conchita Supervia — “the quintessence of the Spanish temperament.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: This series is to be continued at irregular intervals.

Reviews of the Month

This would indeed be a summer of discontent were we dependent on American sources only for material; but the dribble from these plus the freshet from others amounts to a near flood. Kodaly's "Dances from Galanta" will interest many, as will the "Good Friday Spell" and Dvorak's "American" Quartet on London LP. Special attention may be directed to the Raphael Arie "Death of Boris" on page 56, also to Munch's "Danse Macabre."

Boom in Sibelius

SIBELIUS: *Symphony No. 1 in E minor. Tor Mann conducting the Stockholm Radio Orchestra. (Capitol-Telefunken album 8020, \$7.25.)*

SIBELIUS: *"Tapiola." Sir Thomas Beecham conducting the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. (RCA Victor set 1311, \$2.50.)*

What ever became of the Sibelius vogue? In its cosmic aspects it was largely an American—perhaps it would be better said, a Boston—phenomenon, radiating therefrom by disc and air to the subordinate centers of symphonic culture. I may be tempting fate by saying that I can't remember when the last Sibelius set came from Koussevitzky—there'll probably be three in the morning mail—but it is significant of that lag in interest that the Doctor's gala season at Tanglewood this year included no work (even an itty-bitty one) of the Finnish Franck.

It might be thought that Capitol would be invading a clogged market in producing another version of a work once as popular as the Sibelius No. 1, but it is an oddity confirmed by the reference books that there are currently but two versions of this work in circulation (three if one counts a duplicated Ormandy, the old Minneapolis still available in England) and these are both American in origin (Ormandy - Philadelphia, Barbirolli-Philharmonic). I find too, in re-reading some old comparisons, that the good, sound, energetic work of Tor Mann is more in the spirit of the old Kajanus issue than those of domestic origin—the spirit of modesty and unpretentiousness in which the home folks view Sibelius, rather than the "significance" attributed to him by *auslanders*. There is a good deal of virtue in the recording, also, though this orchestra has not too much inherent brilliance. The scherzo is rather weak, tonally, but I can listen to the whole of it with more pleasure than to the gesturesome Ormandy.

As a replacement for the Koussevitzky "Tapiola" of early 1942, this



—Finnish National Travel Office.

Jan Sibelius — "the spirit of modesty and unpretentiousness."

Beecham may be somewhat premature, for that was a brilliant exposition of the score, and a master recording for its time. Needless to say, the orchestra is more nearly itself in this contemporary version, and Beecham's view of the score is both penetrating and sympathetic. However, I'd rather have his "Don Quixote" of Strauss than this.

The Galanta of Kodaly

KODALY: *"Dances from Galanta." Victor de Sabata conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. (Deutsche Grammophon album 12, \$6.)*

What went on in Berlin in 1939 during the visit of De Sabata, which resulted in the present set and the one of Respighi's "Feste Romane" discussed last month, may be clarified when the Italian maestro visits us for his concerts here next fall; but it is plainly apparent that the German technicians produced their most talented microphones and choicest wax for their Axis guest. As the "Feste Romane" was a remarkable example of reproduction in the first issue of Deutsche Grammophon reissues, so

these two discs are outstanding among the second batch.

Those who have overlooked the Fiedler - Boston "Pops" version of these spirited and artfully arranged dances (of itself a superior example of American recording methods, in RCA Victor album 834) will find, in De Sabata's more personalized treatment, music which shares some of the characteristics of the Liszt and Enesco rhapsodies without being exactly like either. Its tziganerics are deeper, of a more passionate character, its gaiety less abandoned.

To a degree, this may be just the impact of De Sabata on the music, for he seems that shrewd kind of conductor who attempts—in the spotlight glare of the phonograph, at least—nothing for which he does not have an active flair, a creative understanding. Here he commands wonderfully rich and plastic playing from the Berliners in a virtuoso performance of the Mengelberg or Stokowski emphasis and brilliance. The recording will support comparison with the very best of today.

A Bizet Riddle

BIZET: *Symphony in C. Artur Rodzinski conducting the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra. (Columbia LP ML 2051, \$3.85.)*

It is not our custom to revalue, at length, reappearances on long playing discs of works already in the catalogues, but I have had so much pleasure from a rehearing of this work in its present performance that I feel inclined to underscore it for those to whom it may be a novelty. Certainly there is no other symphonic music in the month's issue which has a like degree of freshness and charm.

Though few of us conceive Bizet as a youthful prodigy in the sense of a Mendelssohn or a Schubert (omitting Mozart, for whom there is no parallel) it is a fact that this work of his seventeenth year is teeming with a musicality, a control of his craft no less exceptional. Why it was not immediately performed while he was a student at the Paris Conservatory, none of his biographers can tell us. That it waited until 1935 for its world premiere (under the direction of Felix Weingartner in Basle) is a further element in a riddle which appears to have no solution.

Bizet's able biographer Martin Cooper sees in the first movement the influence of Beethoven, in the second Mozart and Rossini. I agree with these, but find still more potent the likeness of Schubert, especially in that same second movement which