

On Being Phonogenic

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THE artist, led to the microphone for slaughter, presents a strange facade.

It is not, as you might suspect, with trembling hands, beaded brow, and faltering step that he approaches his fate; it is not a bleak moment of funereal despair—on the contrary, the ceremony of his first vis-à-vis meeting with a microphone more closely resembles a wedding. This is the moment for which he has waited; a planned, contracted, discussed, dreamed-of moment, and withal, a moment of supreme doubt. Is this a mistake after all? Is this microphone as attractive as she first seemed? What have we in common? So, it is with nervous smiles, bad jokes, and cold fingers, that the artist comes into the studio for the first time. Sometimes the bridegroom (to carry this metaphor to an unseasonable length) tears the flower from his lapel and rushes out of the room; but even if this happens, the wedding attendants know that he will be back, for the microphone, among other things, is irresistible, and offers the one chance for the performing artist to leave behind a goodly progeny.

Why the doubts and fears? The microphone is not a two-headed monster; and that, curiously enough, is one of the things wrong with it. For were it a two-headed monster, that would mean four ears, and as it happens, the microphone is a one-eared monster. One-eared, and therefore without perspective, without a sense of direction, and without a brain which would allow discrimination between what should be heard and what shouldn't. This makes the microphone a curiously eccentric, demanding, and uncompromising auditor, and the reasons are perhaps worth looking into.

If you are the kind of person who

demands empirical proof, you might try the following: cover one ear and see what it does to your hearing. You will notice a loss of the sense of direction; sounds are not clearly classifiable and perspective has lost its sharpness. However, you are as yet ahead of the microphone because, I assume, your brain is still working—even though it may not appear so to anyone who is watching you walking around with one ear covered. The fact is that we hear an enormous amount of sound which the brain never registers, or, if it does, with a feebleness that makes them unimportant. Even while listening carefully we hear many more sounds than we want to hear, and thus, we must isolate for ourselves what is, for the moment, important. This was poignantly illustrated to me in my youth by my father who had, he told me, reduced my mother's really charming but somewhat continuous small talk to a constant murmur which left him free to consider more important things! This selectivity is not within the capacity of the brainless microphone, which offers us all of the sound reaching it. (By the way, you may uncover that other ear now, if you wish.)

Why then not use two microphones and more closely approximate human ears; since directivity is in part the result of multiple hearing? Well, that can be done, but it can't be done halfway. Viz. (to use a scientific term), you would require not only two microphones, but two separate lines leading through independent amplifiers to two speakers, and if, at any point, you went to one line, or one speaker, you'd lose the binaural effect. Even then, it would not be perfect, for the two channels (binaurality) are just a step towards a more desirable polyaurality.

Furthermore, the room in which you hear the recorded music should in every way duplicate the room (that is, the studio) in which the music is recorded, so that the reverberation characteristics of each are the same. This, as you can see, would call for some rather expensive remodeling in your home, so I think that for the moment we'd better drop our polyaural plans. (One reminder: No matter how many microphones are used in a studio, the basic problem remains as long as those microphones are fed into one receiving channel.)

Let us admit then that the microphone offers us some problems. But what about it? Would photographic reality be desirable? Something like that was achieved with the player-piano of years back and I do not remember it as being a particularly inspiring artistic experience. Nor are the best paintings described (except by the naive) as being "so lifelike that you'd think you were looking at a photograph." Maybe we'd be better off considering a phonograph record as a special product which is the result of a special technique with artistic qualities of its own, rather than attempt to reproduce what cannot be reproduced except with a mountainous amount of electrical equipment. In any case, there is not much choice. The phonograph record is a special product, and the artists who come to recognize that point eventually become the most successful record makers and are, in a true sense, phonogenic.

Accepting the microphone for what it is, we can realistically consider the problem facing the musical artist who makes records. First of all, precision is much more acceptable to a microphone than emotion, and this fact has led some to the specious conclusion that precision is the most important quality in records. Of course, that is not so; any more than it is so in a concert hall. Precision is desirable, yes, but not to the exclusion of anything else. Moreover, precision, to the microphone, does not mean the absence of wrong notes; it means



exactitude of pitch and of time values. The microphone has its own concept of speed. I have noticed many times that slow passages sound slower on records than they do in the concert hall. (No doubt the absence of visual distraction has something to do with this.) Speed in playing, on the other hand, can be bad on a record if the microphone is unable to absorb the reverberation sound between notes; the result then is a blur of sound, and the artist's precision comes to naught. Yet precise attention to detail counts for much, particularly if large orchestras are involved. The microphone exposes faults in musical performances that would never be heard in the concert hall.

The experienced conductor for records, or at least a conductor who takes record making to be a special division of his activities, leaves nothing to chance. He will do very little on-the-spot experimenting, and will know by the time he comes to the recording session what he wants in the way of sound, and for the most part how to get it. Experience will help; for it is important to know while you are in the studio what approximately is going on to the record, and the only way to know this is through some knowledge of the limitations under which you are working. These limitations are not oppressive, but they are limitations and should be known as such by those who work in records. (I must pause to make a correction here: these are the things that should be known by the recording director, but it helps if the artist himself knows the limits that the recording director must impose.) The chief of these limitations is a restricted volume range. Happily, with the development of surface-noiseless records and new techniques, this particular restriction is becoming less and less onerous, but in general it is not possible for a record to hold the greatest possible *forte* or the greatest possible *pianissimo*. The artist may ignore this fact if he wishes, but then it will be necessary for the engineer under the direction of the recording director to suppress the extremely loud passages and increase the extremely low passages. Since that is a mechanical procedure, it seems to me more musical if the artist himself knows the limitations and works within them.

In dealing with the microphone, one is always faced with a number of conflicts which can be settled only by what appears to be occasional compromises. Not just for the reasons given above, but for a number of vagaries to which a microphone is subject, such as changing humidity, or

temperature. But is it really compromise? I don't think so. Any more than it is compromise to say that you cannot play a violin part on a double bass or that a cello cannot play below a low C.

This brings us to a point which is very important in record making. In the concert hall, it is necessary for the artist to project; in some cases, the further away you are from the point of projection, the sweeter the tone you will hear. You will not be aware of the mechanics of music making, and you will hear a tone enriched by its absorption of the tonal characteristics of the hall. In the recording studio, the artist must restrict this projection, for nothing sounds quite so bad through a microphone as a forced or over-projected tone. On the other hand, subtlety does not always come off, and it is necessary to be somewhat over-expressive.

The artist should be able to recognize what constitutes a good sound or even a good performance when he hears the playbacks of his recordings, which is much more difficult than appears. This can be understood by remembering that a photograph of ourselves is more often a surprise than a confirmation of what our concept had been, in spite of our everyday contact with mirrors. It is much more difficult to know how we sound, as many artists—among them the greatest in the world—have learned upon hearing a playback at a recording session. Some are shocked, some are pleased, depending upon the ego of the individuals involved. Some artists have a preconceived idea of how they sound and hear only that sound on the record, no matter what comes out. But more difficult is the artist whose inner ear has told him that he sounds a certain way. He is the one who looks, unsuccessfully, to the record for a reproduction of a sound which exists only in his imagination.

Have I painted too bleak a picture for the artist who makes records? Perhaps. Because when he enters the recording studio, the artist is presumably in the hands of experts. But we are all in the hands of experts: even when we go to the barber shop to get a haircut. And, as in the barber shop, there is always that moment when the barber holds up the mirror to our neck to show us a bare expanse of chalk-like skin ending in a badly curved line halfway up our skull. There is little comfort now in knowing that we have been in the hands of an "expert"; and it is too late to say, "I wish I'd told him not to take so much off the back."

Goddard Lieberman, vice president



My Favorite Records

Max Ascoli, longtime anti-Fascist, dean at the New School for Social Research, and author of "The Power of Freedom," admits to being "a stuffed shirt" in matters musical. Regretfully, even penitently, he advises us that no moderns would figure on his list of favorites. But just so that he will not be put completely beyond the pale, Mr. Ascoli adds, "I do, however, love Neapolitan songs, the postwar 'Monastero a Santa Chiara' for instance."

BACH: "Come Sweet Death." Pablo Casals.

BACH: "Bist du bei mir." Elisabeth Schumann.

BACH: *B minor Mass*. The Robert Shaw recording.

BEETHOVEN: "Kreutzer" Sonata. The Menuhins.

BEETHOVEN: Violin Concerto. Heifetz and the NBC Orchestra under Toscanini.

BEETHOVEN: Opus 130 Quartet. Busch Quartet.

HANDEL: "Water Music" Suite. Harty and the London Philharmonic.

MONTEVERDI: Nadia Boulanger collection of madrigals.

MOZART: Quartet for Flute and Strings in A, K.298. René Le Roy and Pasquier Trio.

MOZART: Piano Quartet in E flat, K.493. Hortense Monath and Pasquier Trio.

VERDI: Requiem Mass. The Rome recording. Serafin conducting.

VERDI: "Pace, pace" and "Addio del passato." Claudia Muzio.

VIVALDI: "The Four Seasons." Molinari and the Santa Cecilia Orchestra.

of Columbia Records, Inc. (in charge of Masterworks), speaks of the problems of recording as one, in his own phrase, much-married to the microphone. His feeling, thus, for the artist is one of compassion rather than disparagement.