

On Playing Music LOUD

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AS AN instrument of musical enjoyment, a contributor to intellectual improvement, and a source of quiet relaxation, the phonograph is a boon beyond compare. Whether, at the same time, it promotes domestic felicity is at least open to question. Most males of my acquaintance when probed on the subject—after entering the usual reservations about its radio-active uses for the kiddies' Lone Ranger program, or their wives' interest in the give-away-everything programs—are in agreement that it contributes remarkably little to this important state.

The reason is one not likely to be discussed in those soft-carpeted salons of display where one is invited to hear "the best in reproduction in the finest of furniture"—which may, to your surprise, turn out to be a shoemaker's bench, a drum table, or a lacquered Chinese cabinet with provision to enclose your treasured collection of snuff boxes. Not there will you hear the reasons why you and your wife, who "always got along so nicely," now have differences, even if only acoustical. With their coaxial speakers, high-fidelity amplifiers, boosts, and expanders, these machines can not only play well, but loud.

And, to bring the matter to a head, it is the men who like them loud, the women who like them quiet. I find myself in basic agreement with my friends when I suggest that most women like to play records (or the radio) at a sub-normal volume because they can thus continue their chatter over the music, or above it, or—let us be frank—in spite of it. This leads to the inevitable next question, or questions: Do women really listen to music, or do they merely tolerate it as background to their moods? Is music a part of their experience because it is thought-provoking and soul-satisfying, or merely because it comes out of a "blond" cabinet, or something in Swiss Modern, or Chinese Hepplewhite, and thus adorns the domestic premises? It is hard to say. There are medical men who state that the reasons are physiological, that the female is more sensitive to sound than the male, and that—like such familiar pets of our civilization (I hesitate to say other pets) as the cat and the dog—they are hypersensitive to the upper frequencies and simply cannot endure the blare and blast of the brass, the shimmer of tremolo on the E string, or any good long crescendo.

Whatever the reasons for these dif-

ferences—and I am willing to grant that they may relate to the physiological, the decorative, or the social—they exist, and must be reckoned with. From the appealing "John, would you mind turning that down a little?" to the accusatory "Dear, *must* you have it that loud?"; from the querulous "Must you blast at me like that?" to the denunciatory "I think I'll go into the other room," the gamut is familiar, with variations that are infinite.

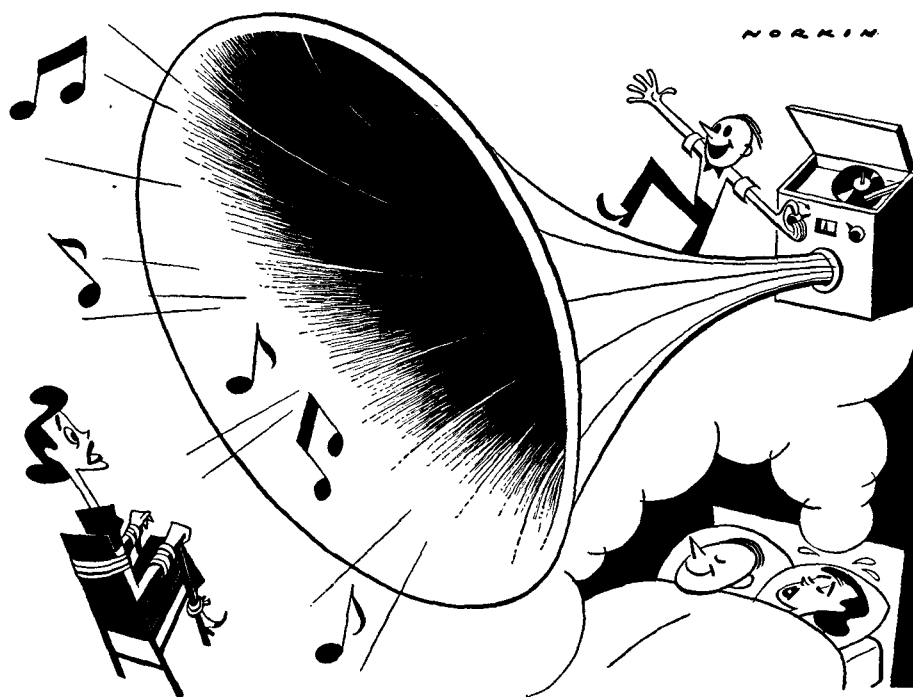
Men rarely object to proper volume; not they the ones who retreat the sensitive controls to an ignominious position. They prefer the far position on the right that is generally in the wrong for those they have espoused. What they mainly challenge is the inconsistency of their dearly beloved, who will accept without question normal volume in reproduction so long as it is a flute, a violin, or perhaps a crooner—whose normal volume could disturb no household. The piano, however, treads on dangerous ground; and as for the symphony orchestra, its harmonies can often constitute reasonable grounds for divorce.

As our reproductive instruments are presently constituted, it is impossible to deliver the impact of a symphony orchestra or its components at what might be called the blissful, or hand-in-hand, level. Some manufacturers make contrary claims, but their specifications are not subject to close scrutiny. The strings, yes; the brass, maybe; but what becomes of the

clarinet and the oboe, the bassoon and the flute, not to mention the glockenspiel? In the concert hall, all of these reach our ears at a similar level of intensity, but it is a rare record—so rare I haven't yet heard it—on which such nuances of color can be conveyed with the volume control in the retrograde, or female, position.

Let us not tax the engineers with considerations outside their province. Given a conductor engaged with the "Ride of the Valkyries," a competent orchestra, and a resonant hall, are they to lop the top from a climax in order to prevent domestic dissension among a pair of lovebirds they have never seen? Should they close their eyes not only to the clear indications of the score but also their ears to the glorious surge of sound in order to keep Mary from going home to mother? No. They must remain faithful to Richard, and let John fare as best he can.

Perhaps it will be the set makers who will furnish the answer by providing—akin to the dual controls known to training planes and automobiles for beginning drivers—separate panels marked "His" and "Hers." If the sound becomes intolerable as Toscanini measures Tchaikovsky with his ear and prepares him for the fall, "Hers" will shudder a bit and lessen the sound a trifle, without recourse to entreaties or pleas. If this solution is inadequate, there can always be earphones . . . though I hesitate to think of "His" feeling about earphones after investing in push-pull amplifier, variable reluctance pickup, gate circuit noise-suppressor, thirty-watt output, multiple cone speaker, and reflex bass cabinet with infinite baffle. Certainly the baffle would be infinite.



The Basic Library—

Bach: Instrumental Works

Concertos for One Instrument

In the Italian Style. From an imposing list that once included duplicated harpsichord versions by Wanda Landowska and Ralph Kirkpatrick the domestic representation of this great work has sadly dwindled. However, it was the Schnabel performance among these which was clearly unapproachable, and its perpetuation is occasion for gratitude (RCA Victor album 806). This, especially, is true of the slow movement, for which Schnabel's affection is evident and profitable. If there is occasion to believe that he considers the first and last movements as mere parentheses around the substance of the work, one cannot wholly take issue with him. The substance is substantially conveyed.

Why the fine Landowska version on harpsichord should be presently available only as an import (HMV DB 5007/8) I have no way of knowing. In any case, those who are devoted to the work as heard from this instrument should make the effort to obtain it, for the pliant, strong-lined playing of the last movements is as uncommon as Schnabel's of the *andante*. Her nominal competitor (in Decca album AU 4) is Sylvia Marlowe, who cannot command any like amount of finesse and variety of tone color. Moreover, Miss Marlowe is partial to a muscular treatment of her instrument which merely results in unpleasant sounds. It should be noted, too, that this is Decca recording of the American variety, a haphazard, limited technique not to be confused with the certainty and resource of English Decca's *ffrr*.

In D (after Vivaldi). The distinctions already noted between the work of Landowska and Marlowe are applicable here also, with the further fact that this recording by Landowska (RCA Victor album 1181) is considerably more recent than the import mentioned above. Miss Marlowe's is no better than the dullish job of the "Concerto in the Italian Style." In fact, all that may be said of disfavor to Mme. Landowska is the fault of her sponsors, who have made of this album a catch-all of Rameau, Mozart, Scarlatti, etc. Miss Marlowe's performance is to be found in the same Decca album (AU 4).

In D minor (after Vivaldi, Opus 3, No. 11). Hearty work by Ray Lev in a work originally for strings, and also transcribed for organ. The recording is clear, the sound a little clangorous; not without cause in the original play-

ing. Unbreakable discs and quiet surfaces. (Concert Hall.)

Concertos for Orchestra and Clavier

No. 1 in D minor. The advantages and disadvantages of the versions by Eugene Istomin, piano, with the Adolf Busch Chamber Music Players (Columbia album 624) and Edwin Fischer playing the solo part and conducting a chamber orchestra (RCA Victor album 252) are so evenly balanced that an arbitrary choice between them is virtually impossible. Fischer's probing,



well-considered musicianship finds both a challenge and a fulfilment in this music, which he plays with exceptional taste. Istomin has no such intangibles to add to the very tangible fluency and strength of his spirit; but his spirit is the restless one of youth which responds to the spur of Busch's conducting as well as to its restraint. The Istomin piano is clearer, the Busch strings more resonant than those of the Fischer version—which may be, for some, the decisive factor. I would retain the Fischer version if I owned it but take whichever is available if I were buying one now.

Mention should also be made of this concerto as arranged for violin and played by Szigeti with the New Friends of Music Orchestra under Fritz Stiedry. The spirited inflections of Szigeti and the forceful drive of Stiedry will recommend this version to all but the most exacting purists. The recording tends to be a bit too brittle.

No. 5 in F minor. Fischer's able performance with a chamber orchestra (RCA Victor album 786) has no known competitor, and thereby must

be accepted for what it is. His inclination to angular lines and metronomical tempos in works of this genre is not persuasive, nor are the largish orchestra and overuse of the pedal additions to the charm of the performance. Tonally, however, it is good.

Concerto for Two Claviers and Orchestra

No. 2 in C. The Schnabels, Artur and Karl Ulrich, are both percussive pianists, a trait of particular disadvantage when multiplied by two. However, the musical values are well realized in RCA Victor album 357, for which Adrian Boult is the conductor, and there is no accessible alternative in pianistic form.

IMPORTS

Those who are nonresponsive to the efforts of Istomin and Fischer in the *D minor* concerto—or in its violinistic version by Szigeti—are reminded of a fine playing by Harriet Cohen, piano, with a group of Philharmonia Orchestra players directed by Walter Süsskind (English Columbia DX 1312/4). It is certainly the best reproduced of the four versions noted, but otherwise not of overwhelming merit. Searchers for the Concerto No. 4 in A (formerly carried in the RCA Victor catalogue as album 386) will find it played by Edwin Fischer and his chamber orchestra on HMV DB 3081/2.

Similarly, those who prefer the second concerto for two claviers in C played by harpsichords rather than pianos will be interested in the performance of Ruggero Gerlin and Marcelle Charbonnier in Volume Five of the *Anthologie Sonore*. The players are thoroughly capable, the recording thinner than today's standards admit.

Running somewhat ahead of the categories treated above, I would like to mention the appearance of a superb new version recently arrived from England of the E major concerto for violin and string orchestra employing Gioconda de Vito, a thirtyish Italian instrumentalist, as soloist with an ensemble directed by Anthony Bernard (HMV DB 9370/2). To note that it is stronger violin playing and more affecting musicianship than can be heard in the existing versions of Yehudi Menuhin (formerly in the RCA catalogue but now available as an import, HMV DB 2003/5) or Adolf Busch (Columbia album 530) is to mark Miss De Vito at once as a top-flight violinist. She is all of that and a fine artist as well, as her warm, expressive phrasing in the slow movement affirms. The ensemble, moreover, has the harpsichord continuo in its proper place and prominence, and the recording is considerably superior to the older ones.

—THE EDITOR.