

# Some Highs and Lows

## SOME ACTIVE THOUGHTS ON STATIC

THE PROBLEM of static elimination in our new plastic records continues to be a hot one. Electric charges that attract and hold dust on records are only too familiar to those of us who have been collecting the break-resistant discs. (I use the term advisedly—having, to my utter astonishment, smashed one into small pieces recently.) The trouble is made acute by the fact that the very motions which serve first to clean and then to play are those which generate the charge itself. Rubbing, especially with a dry woolen cloth, is the classic way of building up a static charge. But the rapid travel of the phonograph needle down its long spiral may also build up a formidable electrical tension.

Last spring [SRL June 4] the "Omegatron" static remover burst upon a delighted world—for a while. This ingenious device was no more than a camel's-hair brush with a protected strip of radioactive polonium mounted on one side. The alpha rays emitted by it, though non-penetrating, ionize the air an inch or so in front of the brush; a wave across your plastic record and the static charge leaps merrily into the (ionized) air, the record is discharged—the dust slides off. It worked and still does. But some disturbing rumors anent nuclear radiation [SRL July 9] were capped off by a dreadful medical report prominently written up in *The New York Times* of August 1, clippings of which soon bombarded this department. There were dire poison hazards, it seems. Not from the alpha radiation itself which is undeniably harmless, but from the possible ingestion (a nasty word) of tiny flecked-off particles of air-borne polonium, which on the inside of you make a very deadly cumulative poison.

Shades of Hiroshima! I admit that in the latter hours of August 1, 1949, I quietly retired my "Omegatron" brush to the back of a very high shelf in a very dark corner.

Common sense, however, has gradually got the better of me and a new laboratory report just received directly challenging the contentions of the UCLA account described above has brought me back to the rather shaky feeling that perhaps the "Omegatron," polonium and all, is truly no more dangerous in the home than a bottle of iodine or a beryllium-coated fluorescent lamp. The new report is reasonable and sounds authoritative. For common-sense people the static brush is a useful gadget, though one which

should be treated with respect and just a little awe.

Meanwhile another and much more prosaic static remover has been launched, based on a quite different principle. One form of it is Walco's "Stati-Clean." (I could invent a better name than that, I think!) Radiation-shy souls had best take heed—this is strictly common-clay stuff, no more dangerous, say, than a good swig of denatured alcohol. Like other devices so far propounded, this static remedy is neither cure nor prevention. But it, too, works. The alcohol-base liquid when wiped thinly on both sides of a plastic record dries out to leave a molecule-thick residue of some hygroscopic substance (a material with the power to absorb moisture from the air). The infinitesimal and invisible wetness thus produced allows static electricity to drain away as rapidly as it is formed.

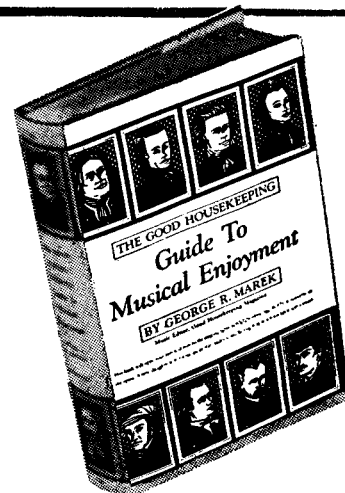
Immediate questions might be, first and most vital, does the application of a coating of foreign substance affect the played sound of the record, and second, will it have any adverse long-range effect upon the plastic itself?

I've been trying out "Stati-Clean" for a number of weeks and have some tentative answers. To test the first question, I deliberately smeared an inch-wide strip of the liquid as thickly as its water-thin consistency would allow across one side of an LP record. In the subsequent playing there was absolutely no noticeable change of sound as the needle went through this heavy streak on each revolution. Quality, I'd say, is not affected.

As to long-range damage, I cannot be sure. It is reasonable to assume that moisture, *per se*, will not harm plastic (and the quantity of moisture is incredibly small). I suggest that even if the hygroscopic material itself somehow ate into plastic—and again, the quantity of it is extremely small—the long-range advantages of freedom from damage via grinding dust might easily counterbalance this microscopic harm.

Whether you wish to bother with these semi-makeshift remedies for static troubles depends on the way you treat your records. Record care varies amongst us roughly as the care and feeding of children! However, the basic problem will not be solved rightly until you can buy permanently static-free records in your local shop and thus dispense with all horse-and-buggy methods.

—EDWARD TATNALL CANBY.



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## MUSIC

(Continued from page 20)

public remembers only the bright side, ignoring a multitude of often unpleasant details that contribute inevitably to such a career as that of Sigmund Romberg. Readers will appreciate the fundamental honesty as well as the glamour and human interest of such a book as "Deep in My Heart."

*Sigmund Spaeth's latest book is "A History of Popular Music in America."*

### "Ring" Master

THE WAGNER OPERAS. By Ernest Newman. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 724 pp. \$5.85.

By KATHLEEN O'DONNELL HOOVER

WITH the recent publication in Germany of Wagner's complete prose sketches for the "Ring," the need of a fresh appraisal arose. This is fulfilled in Ernest Newman's latest addition to the vast body of critical writing on the tetralogy. Though the final volume of his "Life of Richard Wagner" aroused the fear that his flair for sifting wheat from chaff might have dulled, "The Wagner Operas"—which includes his rewritten studies of the rest of the Wagnerian oeuvre—gives complete reassurance on that account.

Like literary creations of equal stature, the "Ring" negates the theory that a work of art should be self-revealing. The wealth of meaning becomes clear only through exploring, step by step, the conception and realization of the composer's project. The new sketches shed further light on the creative process, and Mr. Newman's scrutiny of them saves the lay reader a struggle with their not ideally lucid prose. The "Ring" can now be re-examined with new understanding. The original scheme of the drama is seen to have been changed more drastically than was supposed. Wagner was forced to discard some of his most potent ideas: the cosmic sweep of the action in the source materials certainly could not be transferred to the stage. A striking instance is his intention to treat the whole race of the gods, instead of concentrating their force in the person of Wotan. The conflict with the two world-evils, greed and sloth, was to have culminated in the gods' world-mastery and creation of a higher world-order, rather than in their self-willed downfall. Exigencies

of the theatre also caused Wotan to be given human traits, and his struggle with Alberich to be relieved with less grim episodes. Something of the earlier Aeschylean intensity and moral grandeur of the "Ring" was thus lost in its final formulation.

The prose sketches, further, bear out Wagner's amazing claim that he first conceived the entire tetralogy in terms of music. A host of marginal jottings prove that his musical moods generated the words, and that the dramatist's total reliance on the musician to convey his thought forced the latter to evolve the symphonic technique of exposition that is Wagner's highest operatic achievement.

Mr. Newman discusses only what has bearing on the evolution of the dramas in his survey of their sources, mythical and historical. The same concern with essentials marks his analysis of the scores. His text contains a minimum of motifs in the usual skeletonized form and with the specific labels that convey so few of the significances which a theme may have had for Wagner, or of the psychological changes that it undergoes in the course of the action. The study of salient examples of this variation-process is the most fervent part of the book, a manifesto of a "Complete Wagnerite," though even here Mr. Newman's critical eye is not veiled. He condones none of the confusion in dramatic psychology that resulted from Wagner's conception of episodes in different terms at different stages of his labors, nor does he invariably hold, with Wagner, that the music illumines the confusion.

His criticism of modern performances of the "Ring" seems somewhat trenchant. So far postwar standards throughout the world have not been impeccable, but could any prewar

performances, except those directed by the Wagner family, have realized the composer's intentions? His vehement brochures on the interpretation of the operas bear witness to his scorn for the standards of his time, and we know that even in the Bayreuth productions not all of the artists corresponded perfectly in appearance or mentality to their roles. Intellectual adequacy and a fitting contour, though desirable in Wagnerian, as in all, singers, are not central to convincing interpretation. An intangible quality—the "inner flame," it might be called—is a prerequisite for every participant in a satisfying performance of Wagner. But whatever the minor points on which one might take issue with Mr. Newman, his treatment of a subject that has been sadly belabored for almost a century not only shows an exuberance unusual in an octogenarian, but fresh observation and expression.

*Kathleen O'Donnell Hoover is the author of "Makers of Opera."*

### Orpheus in California

STRAVINSKY. Edited by Edwin Corle. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 245 pp. \$6.

IGOR STRAVINSKY: The Man and His Music. By Alexandre Tansman. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 295 pp. \$3.75.

By ROLAND GELATT

NO MATTER where we turn these days, we are confronted with facts and opinions organized as haphazardly as a counter of socks in a bargain basement. Synthesis is still an intellectual quality in perilously short supply. One need look no further than the three books about Igor Stravinsky which have been published during the past six months. Two of these, "Stravinsky in the Theatre" [SRL June 25] and the present volume edited by Edwin Corle, are—whatever their other qualities—notably deficient in synthesis. Cast in the mold of symposiums, they offer a diversity of opinion about a musician whose most striking characteristic is the diversity of his output. Each is crammed with rewarding perceptions; neither measures up to the challenge of its subject. In the forum presided over by Mr. Corle we can discover how such figures as Erik Satie, Jean Cocteau, Aaron Copland, and Sir Osbert Sitwell view Stravinsky's work; Nicolas Nabokov takes us on a visit to the composer's Hollywood home, and



—Alfred A. Knopf.

Ernest Newman—"exuberance unusual in an octogenarian."