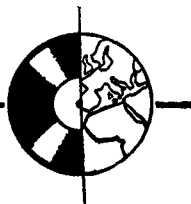


THE OTHER SIDE

(IMPORTED RECORDINGS)



LONDON.

WITHIN the next few weeks the first equipment made in Britain to cope with LP discs will be reaching our shops, but there is still no sign that either of our two major groups will release the records that go with them. Decca is so busy coping with their American releases that they seem scarcely to have time for their normal home production, and their rivals are showing a marked disinclination to be first in the field. I fear that this reluctance may be due to the unexpected persistence of RCA Victor's 45 rpm discs—in other words, the situation in the States is not sufficiently clarified for EMI to take the plunge and back one side.

While we are thus still waiting for the benefits of America's great advance in recording method, I have been glad to learn that some of our very finest reproducing equipment is being shown to New Yorkers at the Audio Fair, organized by the Audio Engineering Society, at the Hotel New Yorker, October 27-29. If any *SRL* readers would like to hear the kind of equipment that I normally use as basis for my record notes, they should pay a visit to Room 50 at this Fair, where a Mr. H. J. Leak is exhibiting the best amplifier ever made in this country at a reasonable price, and a new dynamic moving-coil pickup—incorporating a diamond stylus which gives the finest results I, for one, have ever heard. (I believe that Mr. Leak is staying on at the hotel for a week after the Fair, so that it would be possible to hear his equipment until Nov. 6.) I feel sure that those who have in the past acclaimed the best work of our recording engineers will find in this reproducing gear a worthy partner to our *ffrr* and "Transient-True" records.

Nowadays Beethoven's G major Piano Concerto seems to be a most popular standby, for we have now had no less than three recordings of it within the last twelve months. The latest version of the No. 4 is presented by HMV with what may be described as an "all-star cast." Arthur Rubinstein is the distinguished pianist and he is aided and abetted by no less a person than Sir Thomas himself. The performance is immeasurably superior to the recent Casadesus-Ormandy set, as is the recording, but even so Rubinstein gives us polish rather than poetry, and his playing fails to probe right

into the heart of this great composition. Beecham is not always the Beethoven conductor par excellence, but he is here at his best and subtlest and he must be credited with the loveliest moments (such as the end of the slow movement and the little viola passage in the middle of the Rondo) in a fine if not truly great performance. . . . Readers may be interested in another forthcoming concerto recording which also enlists the services of Sir Thomas. This is the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, with Jascha Heifetz the soloist.

I have often said hard things about Furtwängler's eccentric readings and it is therefore a pleasure to be able to bestow unstinted praise on one of his recordings. The "Dawn and Rhine Journey" from Wagner's "Die Götterdämmerung" has been Toscanini's property, gramophonically speaking, for a long time. Now Furtwängler's marvelous performance with the Vienna Philharmonic seriously challenges the Maestro's supremacy. The Vienna strings have never sounded more glowing than in the Dawn music and their brass shines brilliantly in the "Rhine Journey."

Victoria de Los Angeles is one of those rare singers who lend an especial distinction to any music which they may sing. Her performances of the "Ballad of the King of Thule" and of the "Jewel Song" from "Faust" are outstanding in any way, and I cannot recall any record of the latter excerpt as good as this one. The vocal discovery of 1949 in Europe would appear to be Boris Christoff, a basso in the great Russian tradition who made a remarkable impression at the Salzburg and Lucerne Festivals this summer. He makes his HMV debut singing, not very appropriately, Boris's "Farewell" from Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov," using the Rimsky-Korsakov version. Not since Chaliapin has such *mezza voce* been heard.

To end this month's survey there is another disc by the late Maria Cebotari, who sings, with the Vienna Philharmonic in attendance, "Mistress Ford's Scena" from Act I of Nicolai's "Merry Wives of Windsor." This is not as good a record as the "Ariadne" and those who are fortunate enough to possess Lotte Lehmann's old Parlophone disc will scarcely be tempted by it, but Cebotari shows a lively sense of fun and the music is quite charming. —THOMAS HEINITZ.



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Some Highs and Lows

THE UNCOMPLIANT NEEDLE

"IT TAKES a worried man to sing a worried song," goes a famous Southern blues ballad. No worry is so heart-breaking as that which gets nowhere. The continuing three-speed confusion (this department can't possibly avoid it) has all of us casting misplaced blame right and left for innumerable troubles, petty and portentous. One of the nastiest and most baffling of late—and it is one of those few where engineers and amateurs are equally at sea—is a kind of buzzy, blasting distortion that shows up, particularly in the inner grooves, during the loudest parts of LP-type records. (Breaking up, crumbling, fuzziness, are other descriptive terms.) Shall we blame the record? Can we even evaluate this kind of trouble—for the rub is that no two people seem to agree as to which are the guilty discs or even to what extent; some listeners hear perfect reproduction from a record that in someone else's copy is hopelessly fuzzy, at every climax. Worn points? Faulty arms? Amplifier and speaker trouble? All these can be systematically eliminated and still the trouble persists. And so do the contradictions.

For example, how explain this? We now recognize the magnetic type of pickup as the best and most faithful for high-quality reproduction. Yet there are numerous long playing discs which produce varying degrees of wholly unpleasant blasting as played on several of the topmost brands of magnetic pickup. Naturally blame is cast recordwards. But it happens that these same records when played on certain of the (supposedly inferior) crystal pickups designed for LP records, come through with scarcely a trace of blast or buzz. I have made direct tests end on end and there is no question about this. The quick conclusion that the crystal just doesn't reproduce the high-frequency distortion is no explanation at all, for the best of the new crystals give excellent response to 10,000 cycles and more and can be equalized to give the same

tonal balance as the magnetics. Where, then, is the distortion to be found? Clearly it's not in the magnetic pickup's electrical response: then it must be in the record. Or so many a disillusioned soul has concluded.

In a genuinely exciting two or three weeks the main answers to these questionings have suddenly appeared in concrete form to this writer and the news is good. It looks as though maybe we will be able to live with small-groove, after all.

The difficulties, it seems, are not, as most of us might assume, electrical ones. Instead, they fall into the mechanical category, in that last tiny mechanical link in the long electrical chain, where a micro-stylus traces in actual motion the twistings of a tiny groove, pressed into record material. We all remember the old-time steel needle and the horrid blastings of the inner grooves it made when the worn-down point could no longer trace the tortured grooves; there was a prime example of mechanical distortion. The present troubles with small-groove, slow-speed reproduction are similar but a lot more baffling in the solution. We record sound waves today that wiggle as fast as 10,000 times a second. An LP record revolves once in roughly two seconds. Imagine, then, a sound wave of this high frequency traced on the inner groove of an LP record: in the stretch of some nine inches there must be 10,000 separate wiggles, each one on the order of a thousandth of an inch long!

Lightness, small size—these are already standardized needle factors and the trouble is not in the weight or in the point itself. The major problem, overlooked by most of us, is a matter of needle *stiffness*—the ability of the whole assembly to bend to the groove's will at the unheard of speed of 10,000 reverse curves per inch. "Compliance" is the technical word and the meaning is clear enough. The more compliant a needle is, the more easily it wraps against those flying S-curves.

Then why not go in for a maximum in compliance—let 'er rip? Because another factor is just as important, technically called "damping." You can see what's involved if you think of the normal tendency of any vibrating body to keep on doing what it already is doing. If we are to get an accurate reproduction of groove curves, our styli must be able to stop instantly, to change speed, to jump from soft to loud. The only way to accomplish this is to make it "uncompliant," to put in

brakes that will instantly damp out any leftover vibrations. A stiff arm, plus some squashy material, often rubber-like, like hard rubber, will do this nicely. And so the paradox—we must have a needle with a maximum of two opposite qualities. The search for this particular ingenious compromise has been a major engineering problem.

Now we can sum up quickly. Those LP player cartridges which produce considerable buzzing and blasting of loud passages (other things aside) are those in which the needle is too stiff, lacking compliance to follow the sharper and more violent convolutions of the recorded groove. In such cases, alas, the point merely plows its own devastating course, like an auto out of control, smashing down whatever may be in the way. Some of the finest pickups electrically speaking are guilty of this kind of mechanical activity. Other LP players, even some with quite pedestrian electrical characteristics, having more compliant needle systems, will trace the same twisting grooves with almost perfect mechanical accuracy.

Practical considerations? Enormous. The crystal cartridges designed for the small-groove records by CBS technicians give excellent mechanical response, most of them definitely better than the fanciest magnetics—hard as it is to have to say it. Some other crystals give much inferior electrical response but excellent mechanical tracking—hence they too will be free of buzzy sounds.

Perhaps the most exciting discovery this column has made concerns the familiar GE reluctance magnetic cartridge in its long playing version. GE, it seems, has issued as many as three types of styli already in its continuing efforts to meet the vital tracking problems. The latest type, just now reaching stores, is astonishingly better than its precursors—yet few people would ever notice the slight change in shape, nor is there any indication on the box. The new needle, by direct test, removes most of the blasting that the (still sold) older type produces, on the same record with all other conditions identical. How to tell them apart? The newest GE LP-type needle (with red dot) carries the vertical part of the tiny metal ribbon *all the way across* to just behind the sapphire tip itself; in the older and much less satisfactory type the twist from vertical to horizontal comes *halfway across*. (An earlier type with small square of clear plastic damping under the ribbon is inferior to both.)

If you have the earlier type of GE needle in your cartridge by all means acquire the newest one—and listen to the blasting disappear. Congratulations to GE for progress in a difficult area. —EDWARD TATNALL CANBY.

