

Recordings in Review

Met and Glyndebourne

VERDI: "Don Carlo" excerpts. Jussi Bjoerling, Robert Merrill, Blanche Thebom, and Italo Tajo, with orchestra conducted by Renato Cellini. (RCA Victor LP 1128, \$5.72; 45 rpm album 1495, \$4.90.)

MOZART: "Cosi fan tutte" excerpts. Sena Jurinac, Blanche Thebom, Richard Lewis, Erich Kunz, and Mario Borriello, with Glyndebourne Festival Orchestra conducted by Fritz Busch. (RCA Victor LP 1126, \$5.72; 45 rpm album 1500, \$7.10.)

EACH of these has enough relationship to an actuality to invite comparisons or stimulate hopes, also enough dissimilarity to make such resemblance purely conversational. The reference, of course, is to last season's Metropolitan "Don Carlo," in which Bjoerling, Merrill, and Thebom took part but neither Tajo nor Cellini, and to the promised "Cosi fan tutte" for next season, in which Thebom will and Kunz may take part, though not Busch.

As a record, then, of the past "Don Carlo" this is decidedly fragmentary, though excellent enough for Merrill's robust Roderigo, Bjoerling's brilliant Carlo, and Thebom's virtuoso Eboli. The last of these did her singing in England (Warwick Braithwaite is the able conductor), and it is a mark of new esteem for American recording that little difference in sound is apparent. However, the English orchestra is larger. She sings the "Veil" aria and "O don fatale," Merrill and Bjoerling do the first-act duet, and the baritone adds the eloquent music of the prison scene. Tajo's "Dormirò sol nel manto" is impressive, though he mouths the text more than I like and some wayward *parlandos* defile Verdi's noble line. Cellini, remembered for the vigorous "Rigoletto" of last fall, does this job in a way to make further opportunities for him mandatory.

The "Cosi fan tutte" excerpts are far more homogeneous—to the point, indeed, that one wonders why, if twelve sides be done, the full forty to parallel the older Glyndebourne classic were not undertaken. This is probably the first occasion in phonographic history that the conductor of a complete version of an opera had the opportunity to remake even this much a dozen years later, and the splendid level of Busch's first achievement is not only attained but surpassed, thanks to more just reproduction.

Here, for example, he has taken an American (Thebom as Dorabella), a Slav (Jurinac as Fiordiligi), an Austrian (Erich Kunz as Guglielmo), an Englishman (Richard Lewis as Ferrando), and an Italian (Mario Borriello as Don Alfonso) and infused in them a perfect sense of partnership in Mozart's most sophisticated score. Since Victor has neglected to include either a libretto or an abbreviated text for the music—the tendered chapter from E. J. Dent's "History of Opera" is an interesting, but irrelevant substitute—I am forced to fall back on the admirable brochure, with the complete text, provided in the previous Glyndebourne set. The excerpts in the new issue parallel these sides of the old one: sides 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, part of 9, and 14 ("Come scoglio," the great air of Fiordiligi), all from Act I; sides 23, 26, 27, 28, 30, and 33, from Act II. Over all is the care, the exactness, the clarity of sound which has made Glyndebourne a name to conjure with in recorded opera—now, even more than before.

Slezak, Schwartz, Tauber

STRAUSS: "Fledermaus" duet, "Butterfly" excerpt, etc. Vera Schwartz, soprano, with Richard Tauber, tenor. (Eterna LP 454, \$3.85.)

MOZART: "Das Veilchen," etc. Leo Slezak, tenor. (Eterna LP 453, \$3.85.)

IF THERE is any voice less well known to today's public than that of Leo Slezak, it would certainly be Vera Schwartz's; for if some phonophiles have at some time or other come across a Slezak record, the name of Schwartz is one of those legends to which one can attach place and time (Berlin in the Twenties) but no distinctive sound.

Such need be the case no longer, for this dubbing of duets from "Fledermaus" and "Butterfly" (Acts II and I, respectively) plus "O Schöne Mai" (Strauss) and "Un bel di" (in German) show it to have been a lyric organ of uncommon breadth, richness, and flexibility, utilized with impressive sensitivity. Whether the style for "Fledermaus" is relaxed or closer to careless, I wouldn't dare say; but it is full of its own kind of sensuality, as are the insinuating commentaries by Tauber. The reproduction is early electric, with the limitations thus implied, but the impact of the art is strong.

Allowing for even weaker sound,

the Slezak experience is just as strong, in a repertory that includes Strauss's "Ständchen," Liszt's "O Komm im Traum," Rubinstein's "Die Träne," and Brüll's "Sechse, Sieben, oder Acht." I was particularly struck by the phenomenon of so virile a voice, with so easy a soaring top range, utilized in music usually comprised by vocal limitations. The sound, it should be understood, is definitely poor, but the art is rich. Melchior at his best was the only recent tenor to sound like Slezak in the Strauss "Ständchen."

Late, Great Beethoven

BEETHOVEN: Quartet in A minor, Opus 132. Griller Quartet. (London LP 318, \$5.95.)

ALMOST as if by common agreement the late Beethoven quartets have been placed "off limits" in the latest phonographic era, save for those which already exist in some adaptable form, such as the Budapest wiry C sharp minor or the F major by the Paganini. The more credit, then, to London and the Grillers for attacking a notoriously difficult work—the A minor with the "Heiliger Dankgesang"—and providing it in its first continuous form.

The distinctions do not stop there by any means. This is one of the great quartet recordings, excelled only by some of the Vienna examples in which the throbbing vitality of the players add a dimension to the pure sound not provided by the Grillers. Taken collectively the latter play extremely well in slow or moderate tempi; but in the churning fast movements of such a work as this, or in some of the agitated passages of the slow movement, the structure tends to fall apart, with phrases tumbling in upon each other. Most of this is to be found in the first movement, and those who do not find over-impetuousness distracting here will enjoy the remainder. In any case the recording is splendid.

Franck for Strings

FRANCK: Sonata in A major. Lola Bobesco, violin, and Jacques Genty, piano. (London LP 326, \$4.95.) THE SAME. Marcel Hubert, cello, and Harold Dart, piano; also DEBUSSY: Sonata for cello and piano. (Allegro LP 110, \$5.45.)

I CAN'T say that the Hubert-Dart proposition that the familiar Franck sonata for violin and piano could also be played by a cellist and pianist came as a complete surprise to me, but it is a long time since I have encountered it thus. The first impression

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"Le Martyre" de Oklahoma

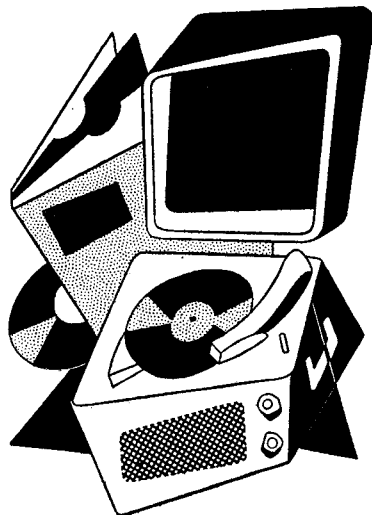
LAST year Houston put Paris to shame by sponsoring the first recording of a major orchestral score by Erik Satie. This month Oklahoma City has its innings with a first recording of Debussy's unfamiliar "Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien" (Allegro LP 100, \$5.45). Victor Alessandro conducts the Oklahoma City Symphony and Chorale; Frances Yeend, Anna Kaskas, and Miriam Stewart account for the vocal solos. "Le Martyre" has been described as Debussy's "Parsifal," although such similarity as exists applies to its position in the composer's chronology and to D'Annunzio's text (a mish-mash of paganism, Christianity, and mysticism) rather than to any qualities inherent in the music itself. Unlike Wagner's last music-drama, "Le Martyre" has never been good box office. When given in full it suffers from the *longueurs* of D'Annunzio's fustian; when given without narration, as in this recording, it is apt to seem—even more than most incidental music—disconnected and chaotic. All this is most unfortunate, because—as Ernest Newman recently wrote—the score contains "some of Debussy's maturest and subtlest thinking."

Stylistically it is kin to the ballet "Jeux," with sharp rhythmic contours, astringent harmonies, and a forthright sense of musical rhetoric. No composer traveled further in one decade than did Debussy between "Pelléas" and "Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien." If the incidental music to D'Annunzio's play adds up to an incohesive total, taken separately section by section it offers many treasureable moments. Debussy never surpassed the woodwind introduction to "La Cour des Lys," the Vox Coelestis air (ravishly sung here by Frances Yeend), the brass fanfares in "Le Concile des Faux Dieux," or the *a cappella* polyphony in "Le Paradis." Several minor cuts have been made, apparently to accommodate the music on one disc, although the accompanying notes breathe no hint of this. I feel sure that a Toscanini or an Ansermet could bring order out of certain passages that here sound muddled and tentative, but on the whole Victor Alessandro and his forces deserve praise for a thoroughly creditable rendering of a difficult work. Allegro's engineers have done their duty in a satisfactory though hardly superlative manner.

Westminster's initial sortie into the realm of contemporary French music increases by four items the rapidly expanding discography of Darius Mil-

haud. The latest increment comprises "Five Studies for Piano and Orchestra" (1920), "Serenade for Orchestra" (1921), "Trois Rag Caprices" (1927), and a Suite from the opera "Maximilien" (1932). Once again a native son of France has been honored by *étrangers*, for these stylish performances come from the Vienna Symphony under Henry Swoboda (Westminster LP 50-51, \$5.95). In the two earlier works Milhaud is sometimes overly concerned with keeping things moving for the sake of the motion—as in the third "Study," which the composer describes as "a superposition of a four-part fugue in A in the woodwinds, a three-part fugue in D flat in the brass, a four-part fugue in F in the strings, and a fugue with a subject combining the notes of these three tonalities in the piano"! However, the "Rag Caprices" and "Maximilien" Suite are both first-rate Milhaud, replete with his own unmistakable flow of invention and grandeur of execution. Special note should be taken of Westminster's luminous recording and of Badura-Skoda's exquisite piano playing in the "Five Studies."

I CONFESS to a deficiency in the proper appreciation of Gabriel Fauré. That ordered serenity of his, prized by so many, charms me at first but invariably ends by my stifling a yawn. A recent batch of recorded music from his pen does nothing to allay this failing. The fairly early Piano Quartet in C minor, Opus 15, is energetically delivered by Artur Schnabel and members of the Paganini Quartet (RCA Victor LP 52, \$4.67) in an interpretation that accentuates the music's Brahmsian qualities. Save for an appealing melody in the second movement's Trio, I find the quartet either derivative or tedious, or both.



Kathleen Long presents a sampling of Fauré's piano music on a London disc (LP 246, \$4.95). Included in her collection is the much-praised Nocturne No. 6, Opus 63, of which Alfred Cortot would have us believe that "the emotion inherent in this work truly surpasses the bounds of personal sentiment and attains that state of universal aspiration which is the mark of a masterpiece." Perhaps M. Cortot lays it on a bit thickly, but there is no denying the gentle beauty of this Sixth Nocturne nor of the Thirteenth, written by Fauré near the end of his long life. The pianist plays this music with loving care, albeit stodgily at times.

Finally, there are eight songs sung by Ninon Vallin (Vox LP 1730, \$4.75). The genteel, salon cadre in which Fauré worked seems to me especially enervating in his songs, but they have so many partisans that I express this opinion with considerable diffidence. In any event, the record is worthy of attention if only for the artistry of Mme. Vallin, who sings—as always—with vocal surety and a veteran's command of effective musical declamation. The Fauré songs in this collection, ranging from "Le Secret" (1880) to "En Sourdisine" (1900), do not—as the notes proclaim—"represent almost his entire creative span." The composer's activity in this genre continued up to 1922. Complete texts are provided, and the dubbing from 78-rpm Pathé masters has been well accomplished.

For the It Never Rains But It Pours Department I nominate Ravel's Sonata for violin and piano. After a quarter century of neglect it has now in the space of six months been recorded four times, twice in France and twice here. The latest American version is by Bela and Virginia Urban (Classic Editions LP 1002, \$5.95). Between this and the earlier recording by Eidus and Smith, noted in RECORDINGS for January, there is little to choose. The Urbans may display more imagination, but this interpretive asset is counterbalanced by a technical debit, for the surfaces (on my copy, at least) are particularly crackly. On the reverse side Simeon Bellison joins the duo in an innocuous Clarinet Trio by Khachaturian.

To end on a cheerful note I herald the appearance on LP of Chabrier's "Trois Valses Romantiques," in the excellent interpretation of Robert and Gaby Casadesus (Columbia LP 2146, \$4). This hearty expression, buttressed with vivid harmonies and droll rhythms, has always captivated this listener. It is as bracing as cold salt air. Never did it sound a more welcome note than after ninety minutes of Fauré.

—ROLAND GELATT.