

Concert of Soft Moans

EDGAR M. VILLCHUR

ONE OF the most widely used musical devices of our era is the assembly of electronic equipment employed by the modern crooner. This device is not generally thought of as a musical instrument, but it could be validly described as such because it has its own characteristic quality of sound. As a musical instrument it is unusual in that, like the kazoo, it derives its vibratory energy from the voice mechanism of its player. Crooning is not singing in the rigorous meaning of that term, but use of the voice apparatus as the primary sound generator of a complex instrument which includes, as essential elements, a microphone, an amplifier, and one or more loudspeakers.

Musical instruments (with a few exceptions in the percussive group) contain two component systems: a vibrating source, such as a reed or stretched string, and a resonator or resonators which give the tone volume and quality. The human voice mechanism is also designed on this pattern. The vocal cords comprise the vibrating element, and the resonating chambers of the body, when properly controlled, are able to select and emphasize various overtones of the sound in such a way as to create a tone with a rich and satisfying harmonic structure.

The crooner abandons the traditional use of the vocal cords and resonating chambers. He substitutes for the full singing voice a sort of moan which changes the role of the body resonators and is inadequate in power for a public performance, but which is of sufficient intensity to serve as the input stimulus of a public-address system. His voice without amplification is ineffectual, like a piano with its sounding board removed, or the vibrations of cello strings stretched on a denuded frame.

The whispers, sighs, and soft moans of the crooner have a quality associated with relaxed effort. The mannerisms of delivery, the pronunciation of lyrics, the timbre, attack, and intonation of tones are all peculiar to

the quiet speaking voice and to the casual performance. But the whispers are those of a monster; they are of concert hall volume or louder. Such sounds could never have existed before the age of amplification. They are no more equivalent to a full voice of the same loudness than the sound of an oboe reed, played softly into a microphone and amplified, would be equivalent to the sound of an oboe.

In addition to the incongruous association of concert hall volume with a style of singing suited more to private lullabies than to public entertainment, the perceived tonal structure of the crooner's voice is radically altered by the increase in sound intensity. It has been experimentally established that the relative sensation of loudness of the various frequency components of a sound is strongly affected by the level of over-all sound intensity. The result is to give the fundamentals and lower overtones of the crooner's voice much greater prominence than they would have had at their original volume. Sound which is amplified, however faithfully, cannot have the same apparent timbre as the softer original. Further-



more amplification is never faultless. The crooner's voice must always be passed through necessarily imperfect electronic and electro-acoustic transmission media, whose distorting characteristics further influence the tone of the

complete system.

IT is a contradiction of terms to speak of hearing a "live" performance of crooning. The crooner works with an electronically created sound. He cannot be called upon to give impromptu performances in random places, since he can only express himself through an amplifying system. If he has a good sense of pitch he can dispense with accompaniment in an emergency, but he cannot do without a microphone. Like the publicity photographs of an instrumentalist which show him holding his violin or flute, pictures of the crooner show him hugging his microphone.

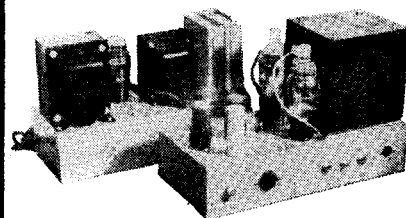
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Edgar M. Villchur teaches a course in sound reproduction at New York University.

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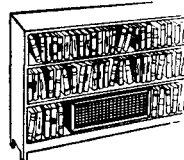
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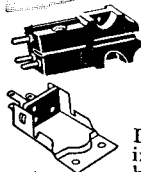
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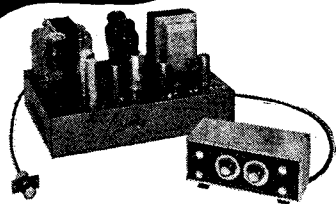
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Pop Roundup

THE standard musical-comedy repertoire is steadily finding its way onto LP discs with the occasional stimulus of a stage or screen revival. And new shows, even the flops and moderate successes, invariably get an original-cast waxing (or should we say "taping"?). RCA Victor's "New Faces" and "Wish You Were Here" hadn't arrived as this was being written, but we have an overabundance of "Roberta." Both Capitol and M-G-M have disc productions of the Kern-Harbach-Fields musical. The M-G-M set is taken from the sound track of the film "Lovely To Look At," and it bears that title (M-G-M E-150). It has the usual vices and virtue of most of these M-G-M track transfers—the virtue being a vast selling power, with which we aren't too concerned here. Without the visual dimension, the aural balance and the pacing appear quite distorted, and much of the music one hears is brassy and pointless. The tempi are not, we can report, as painfully slow as in the same company's "Showboat," but the feeling persists that the performers are much more concerned with the camera than with the microphone. Still, the engineers have the vocal solos blurring out as close-ups against an orchestral backdrop that is huge, complex, and somewhere in the next county. Then, of course, there is Kathryn Grayson. Miss Grayson's vibrato wreaks havoc with such great songs as "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," "You're Devastating," "Yesterdays," and "The Touch of Your Hand."

On the whole, Capitol's version of "Roberta" (L-334), produced directly for discs, recaptures more of the charm, warmheartedness, and continuity of the original productions. The leads, Gordon MacRae and Lucille Norman of "Railroad Hour" fame, sing in relatively straightforward manner. The hoydenish numbers are belted across effectively—in the style set by Celeste Holm back in her "Oklahoma" days—by Anne Triola. A chorus is important throughout. In addition to the above-mentioned songs, both sets include "Let's Begin," "I Won't Dance," "I'll Be Hard to Handle," and "Lovely to Look At." Capitol throws in an Overture, "Madrigal," and "Don't Ask Me Not to Sing." M-G-M opens with "Lafayette," and also includes "The Most Exciting Night"—a little-known lyrical gem—sung rather coarsely by Keel.

Decca has played around quite a bit

with the packaging of its assorted original-cast cuttings from "Porgy and Bess." They were recorded about ten years ago and released in several albums. Volume I, with eight vocal highspots, was re-released some time ago on a ten-inch long-player (DL 7006). Now, prompted perhaps by the success of Columbia's complete version of the opera, Decca has put its fifteen selections on one twelve-inch disc (DL 8042). The recording remains somewhat below today's best standard, but the performances of Todd Duncan, Anne Brown, the Eva Jessye Choir, and the orchestra under the baton of Alexander Smallens benefit from the original direction. For those who are satisfied to own the vocal highlights only, this package is a good buy.

Piano Patter

We have two different Erroll Garners on four different labels this month. One is the Garner we have known, with the steady, thumping left hand and the tantalizingly delayed block chords in the right—a modernist harmonically, but with the primitive drive of barrelhouse. The other Garner has made the common mistake of taking himself too seriously, tending to overarrange and to stray from the elemental beat that underlines his best work and qualifies it as "jazz." The seductive pastel harmonies of the French impressionists have had their good and bad effects on modern jazzmen. Erroll may be suffering from overexposure. This, at any rate, is the impression created by SOLO FLIGHT (Col CL-6209), an LP containing "Cocktails for Two," "Love Me or Leave Me," "Chopin Impressions," and more standards.

The Garner we prefer may be heard in ERROLL GARNER PIANO SOLOS (Atlantic LP 112). This features eight more standards including "Lullaby of the Leaves" and a moody, throbbing "I'll Be Seeing You," formerly issued on a single 78-rpm disc. On Okeh (6898), Erroll has remade two tunes that brought him success five or six years ago on the Savoy label. He plays them at least as well now, and the titles are LAURA and PENTHOUSE SERENADE. In the same effective manner he does STAIRWAY TO THE STARS for RCA Victor (47-4723), and IT'S THE TALK OF THE TOWN for Columbia (39580). One wonders when the pianist will run out of standard tunes!

—BILL SIMON.