

# Cuenod: Musician & Singer

ROLAND GELATT

FROM Noel Coward to François Couperin yawns a stylistic gulf that few performers would attempt to cross, but it has held no terrors for Hugues Cuenod, a Swiss singer in his mid-forties who is a prolific recorder and one of the most versatile musicians of our day. Though he is now on his sixth visit to this country, Cuenod is best known here through his recordings—in prewar years as a participant in the notable Monteverdi and Brahms albums made under Nadia Boulanger's direction, more recently in a succession of LP's embracing a wide range of repertoire from the sixteenth century to the twentieth. They are all the recordings of an individualist: Cuenod's voice—with its nasal, reedy timbre, its almost instrumental projection—bears no resemblance to the standard opera-house tenor, nor is the music in which he specializes anchored to the usual vocal moorings. They are the recordings too of a distinctive musical personality, a re-creative artist on equally good terms with the religious mysticism of Heinrich Schütz and the contemporary buffoonery of Jean Françaix.

An indolent disposition started Hugues Cuenod on his career as a singer. "When I began to sing," he acknowledged at a recent interview, "it was because I wanted to make music. My first impulse was to become a pianist, but I was lazy and I discovered that while piano students had to practise five or six hours a day, singers managed with two or three. In fact, they were expressly forbidden to sing more than that for fear of straining their voices. So I gave up my plans for the piano and concentrated instead on singing. I had no voice to speak of, I sang like a worm. My friends kept asking me why I bothered to take lessons. They thought it a hopeless waste of time. But I was having fun and I refused to be discouraged. After three years in the Basle Conservatory I went to Vienna to study with Mme. Singer-Burian, a strict exponent of the old Marchesi school of voice production. I arrived in Vienna a pale bass-baritone, but by the time I had left two years later my voice had risen to its present range." Cuenod is usually identified as a tenor, although he sometimes sings as low-pitched a role as Pelléas and occasionally performs a high counter-tenor part, like the

Evangelist in the "St. Matthew Passion."

By the age of twenty-five Cuenod was installed in Paris, equipped with a well-formed singing technique and ready to make music as he wanted. But he had also to make money, and as no one asked him to perform Bach or Couperin he took whatever jobs came his way. For years the tall, loose-jointed tenor sang in musical comedies and night clubs, at funerals and public ceremonies. Looking back upon it, he feels this was invaluable training. "It taught me not to be dull." Since Cuenod spoke perfect English (with a clipped accent that betrays his part-British ancestry) and had a hankering to see New York, he tried out for a small part in Noel Coward's "Bittersweet." The autumn of 1929 found him at the Ziegfeld Theatre on Sixth Avenue playing the very minor role of Bertram Sellick. "Altogether I sang in 345 performances of 'Bittersweet.' When the run was over I decided that I had had enough of musical comedy and that I had better begin to make a name for myself in serious musical circles."

Back in Paris he met Nadia Boulanger, an encounter which he terms the "decisive step" in his career. Boulanger recognized how well suited Cuenod's vocal quality and musical style were to the demands of early music, and she soon had him singing

the solos in Bach cantatas for her lectures at the Ecole Normale. Although he never took lessons from Boulanger, in the sense of the usual pupil-teacher relationship, he acknowledges that she exercised by far the greatest influence on his musical development. Performing Bach cantatas with the celebrated Boulanger eventually led to similar engagements elsewhere, and before too long the sandy-haired singer found himself out of the realm of operetta and busy at the kind of music-making that lay closest to his heart.

Cuenod's first recordings were a direct result of his early visit to New York as a member of the "Bittersweet" company. With all his 345 performances, he somehow found time to visit Harlem and to develop a fondness for Negro spirituals. On his return to France he regaled his friends with renditions of the spirituals he had learned, endowing them with the most authentic Southern accent he could muster. In time the French HMV company got wind of these private performances and asked Cuenod to make a record of three Negro spirituals. It was first issued in the mid-Thirties as HMV K 7551. Cuenod still treasures a review which hails him as "a superlative new Negro tenor."

The recent efflorescence of Cuenod recordings began three years ago when the Bach Guild recorded him in several cantatas. Soon thereafter came a variety of LP's for a variety of companies, with the accent largely on music of the past. Couperin's "First Tenebrae" (Allegro) and a collection of English songs of the Renaissance (Westminster) are two outstanding issues featuring this singer. Due for imminent release is a new series of recordings, for American Decca, under Nadia Boulanger's direction in which Cuenod again takes part. In his future plans the stress is more on modern music. For American Columbia he is about to record Stravinsky's new "Cantata," with the composer conducting, and next spring, for London, he is scheduled to sing the part of Gonsalve, the prolix love-sick poet, in Ravel's "L'Heure Espagnole."

It can be seen from the foregoing that there is hardly a company in business for whom Hugues Cuenod has not recorded at one time or another. This multiplicity of affiliations does not bother him in the least, and he shies away from an exclusive contract. "Though I earn my living by music," he explains, "I am not a professional who thinks primarily of business. I prefer the epicurean way, to choose what is most interesting and musically rewarding. My great aim in life is to remain an amateur—but a good amateur, an amateur in spirit, with the skill of a professional."



Hugues Cuenod: "I wanted to make music."



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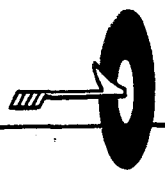
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# HITS AND MISSES



**T**HIS is an era of jazz pedagogy. The colleges are stuffed with jazz courses; Mr. George Avakian is lecturing from such fashionable pulpits as New York's Cosmopolitan Club; Professor Marshall Stearns organizes each year a sort of jazz Bayreuth; and numerous players have taken to expounding the art, with verbal comment, at their given instruments. I have before me an LP called "From Barrelhouse to Bop: A History of Jazz Piano" narrated and played by John Mehegan, with Charles Mingus on the string bass (Perspective PR-1). Now, with pedagogy the great danger always is that a good deal of the letter of the subject will be conveyed, and altogether too little of the spirit. I think something of the sort occurs here, and yet Mr. Mehegan is a very fine pianist indeed, a persuasive talker, and may be recommended on many counts.

I gather from the notes that he has taught at Juilliard since 1947, has lectured at Brandeis and Tanglewood's Music Inn, and that he is an active public syncopator as well as a teacher. His record jacket displays an interesting genealogical diagram of jazz pianists, and he himself plays and discusses samples of the styles of Scott Joplin, Jelly Roll Morton, Pinetop Smith, Earl Hines, Fats Waller, Art Tatum, Teddy Wilson, Bob Zurke, Cy Walter, and George Shearing. It is pointed out that "these are not in any way note-for-note arrangements or copies of recordings, but improvisations that any of these ten great jazz pianists might have sat down and improvised themselves."

Mr. Mehegan's spoken comment seems to me in the main highly sensible. I would not agree with him that what he calls the Dixieland school (including Joe Sullivan and Jess Stacy) produced no great piano soloists; I am less impressed than he is by the undeniable opulence of Art Tatum's work; and I miss any reference to the man who seems to me by far the most remarkable of modern jazz pianists—Lennie Tristano. So far as Mr. Mehegan's own playing is concerned, it is obviously impossible to expect any one person to capture the nuances of all ten of the pianists under consideration. I miss from his Earl Hines, for instance, the enormous rhythmic momentum of that great man, and from Mr. Mehegan's Teddy Wilson the jeweled grace of right-hand invention. But one can't have

everything, and the main point is that Mr. Mehegan is an excellent teacher and pianist. I would simply wish the student to keep bearing in mind the originals—they can be heard in any well-equipped phonograph shop.

It is John Philip Sousa season. There is a charming (yes, that is the word) new movie about him called "Stars and Stripes Forever," in which Clifton Webb gives an interpretation of the man which may not be Sousa but is full of grace and delight, accompanied by a fine resonance of the great marches. It is rapidly being forgotten that while Sousa was a world figure of an eminence rivaling Adelina Patti or King C. Gillette, he had a personal passion for intimate ballads, being himself the composer of, among others, "Oh, Why Should the Spirit of Mortal Be Proud?" But as with the sometime hymnist Sir Arthur Sullivan, the man's musical subconscious kept thrusting up and taking over and, try as he would to think of parlor complaints, his ears boomed with a music louder than the surf. The movie does comic justice to all this. An excellent LP, taken from the sound track, includes the major pieces as played by Alfred Newman and the Fox studio orchestra (M-G-M E176). The program consists of Sousa's own "Stars and Stripes Forever," "Washington Post," "Semper Fidelis," and "El Capitán," and in addition "Light Cavalry Overture," "Turkey in the Straw," "Hail to the Chief," "Dixie," and a rich rendition of "Battle Hymn of the

Republic." This music would have given Theodore Roosevelt the bulkiest of impressions, and in the same mail comes another Sousa program by the distinguished Edwin Franko Goldman band of New York. The eight marches include the four already mentioned plus "High School Cadets," "U.S. Field Artillery," "The Glory of the Yankee Navy," and "The Thunderer." Goldman of New York approaches Sousa with a sparer, brisker spirit than Newman of Hollywood. The difference rather suggests that between the reedy eighteenth-century organ and the luxuriant pipes of latter-day church instruments. I rather imagine Sousa's own tack was closer to Mr. Newman's, but Mr. Goldman's agility and polish are of high appeal.

**T**HE Dixieland shelves continue to bulge. From Florida comes an LP of Preacher Rollo and the Five Saints called "Dixieland Doin's" (M-G-M E174). This admirable little band, with Marie Marcus on the piano and Tony Parenti on the clarinet, have gotten around, among other things, to "Save Your Confederate Money, Boys (The South Shall Rise Again)." The Firehouse Five Plus Two, who can be desperately picturesque at times, and warmly musical at others, are in the latter strain in "Lonesome Railroad Blues" (Good Time Jazz 73). The young shouter Claire Austin of California, recently this department's obsession in the way of hot contraltos, is on her job again with Turk Murphy's band in "Cakewalkin' Babies" (Good Time Jazz 75). And the rival Bob Scobey equipage are represented not only by a new "Peoria" and "All the Wrongs You've Done to Me" (Good Time Jazz 74), but also by an LP including eight of their earlier recordings, with the veteran Negro clarinetists Albert Nicholas and Darnell Howard (Good Time Jazz LP-9). The new record features the unusual combination of Scobey himself, on the single trumpet, and three trombones. Murphy and Scobey, of course, belong historically with Pierre Monteux among the high musical adornments of the Pacific Coast. Or any coast.

We know next to nothing about Flamenco guitar, but can feel the rigor and metallic brilliance of Mario Escudero and Alberto Velez playing behind the singer Pedro Jimenez on the LP "El Pili' Flamenco" (Esoteric 2001). The excellent program notes stress the fact that this ethnologically complex music—Moorish, Byzantine, Jewish, and gypsy—is played with the strictest classical guitar technique. It would seem to be, and has many suggestions to make about the sources of Manuel de Falla.

—WILDER HOBSON.



John Mehegan—A persuasive talker.