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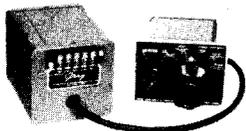


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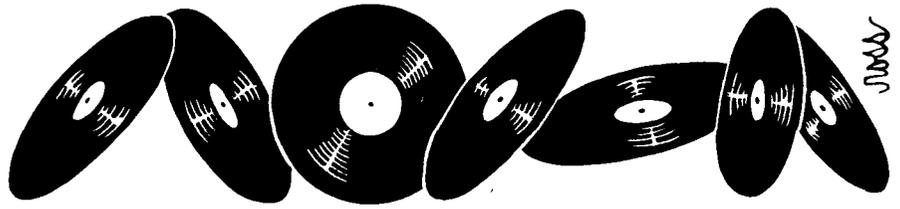
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A Bagful of Song

CREDIT the London perceptiveness that sought out such unusual singers as Kathleen Ferrier, Gerard Souzay, Renata Tebaldi, and Suzanne Danco with the introduction of Irma Kolassi, a performer of whom I know nothing save two sides of highly effective performance on London LL 581, \$5.95. On one side she sings five settings by Ravel of Greek songs (plus the two "Chansons" of the same background); on the other, a miscellany of Fauré and Aubert, of which the latter's "Le Vaincu" turns out to be quite an exceptional song.

Having been disc-deceived as to the final capacities of Danco and Souzay (when exhibited in the concert hall) I will say no more about Kolassi than that she sounds like a younger, healthier Madeleine Grey, with an edgy, rather acid, but distinctly personal voice that makes expressive business of what she sings. A lively sense of textual meaning and musical inflection give much more character to her material than the mere tonal values in the voice itself. A puzzle here too: for Kolassi is described as a mezzo-soprano, whereas she sounds to me like a fine lyric with the kind of middle register such singers should, but rarely do, have. Jacqueline Bonneau is the able pianist, and the recording is good save for occasional pitch waver. My disc had a pockmark on Side Two which resulted in one of those interminable repetitions of the same groove.

If this is one fortunate bag in an unusually attractive bag of song, it is not better than the very different but wholly compelling disc on which Kathleen Ferrier sings such unprepossessing matter as "Ye Banks and Braes," "Drink to Me Only," "O Waly Waly," and "My Boy Willie" with a vast simplicity, an overwhelming earnestness that once heard is hard to forget. (London LS 538, \$4.95). Her vocal power here is as rich as need be, and quite singularly even in texture. On the other hand, I find Gerard Souzay's treatment of Ravel's "Histoires Naturelles" and Falla's

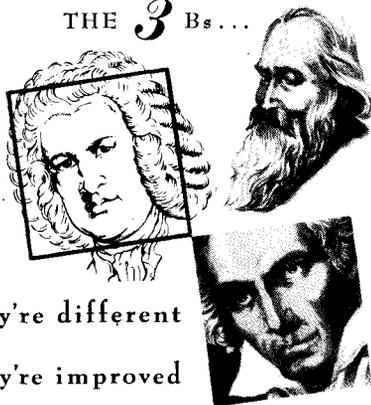
"Siete Canciones Populares Españoles" rather overdone on London LS 536, \$4.95. His intentions are all good, but the way of expressing them is consistently questionable—the microphoning is too close, the voice too dry, the accent on individual words excessive, in a style more *diseur* than *chanteur*. The same Mme. Bonneau aforementioned accompanies well.

By chance the Falla "Siete Canciones" are currently being offered in a performance by Victoria de los Angeles (RCA Victor LM 131, \$4.67) which is closer to, but still a long distance from, the classic one of Conchita Supervia (a Decca reissue on DL 7510). If De los Angeles does not distort as Souzay does, she does not personalize as Supervia did. The same goes for the second side of Granados's "Tonadillas" (a replica of the Supervia second side). It is by no means inept singing, but far coarser in detail, less fine in nuance than the insinuating Conchita's. Likewise—and this is close to heresy—Gerald Moore's piano playing *vs.* Frank Marshall's.

Before attacking a group of other contemporary voices rather heterogeneous in character, I should like to give prominence to a reissue, on the Eterna label (LP 468, \$5.95) of the voice of Celestina Boninsegna, who passed through the Metropolitan briefly in 1906 without arousing more than moderate admiration for a truly beautiful voice. Such an attribute alone was not the key to success in those days; and what makes Boninsegna's singing here of excerpts from "Trovatore," "Ballo in Maschera," "Giacinta," "Ernani," and "Cavalleria" notable must have come later in her career. These include, in addition to a wonderfully spun legato, true emotional communication and an elevated sense of style. To judge from the breadth and detail of the reproduction, these must be relatively late acoustical discs. They will not disappoint any Ponselle or Muzio enthusiast, that I can guarantee.

Of the others, Decca DL 7525 (\$3.85) commands attention for Walther Ludwig's knowing, but not overpersuasive

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singing of Schumann's "Dichterliebe" in the Tauber manner but without the Tauber vocal matter. By no means painful, and sometime pleasing; but only one "Dichterliebe" among many possible others. Michael Raucheisen performs the piano parts with businesslike efficiency. About the only adverse thing to be said about Lyrichord LP23 (\$5.95), on which Maria Kurenko sings (in Polish) the complete collection of Chopin songs, is that the soprano didn't make them ten years ago. The upper tones are sometimes pinched, the lower one insufficiently supported, but the style is always pertinent, the poetic impulse just. This repertory seems unlikely to be repeated, and even if with more voice, not probably with more artistic justice. Good piano background by Robert Hufstader, suitable reproduction.

Similarly extensive if not so exhaustive is Westminster WL 5124 (\$5.95), on which Dr. Alfred Poell sings a comprehensive selection of Beethoven songs (including "An die Ferne Geliebte," and eight other favorites such as "Wachtelschlag," "Ade-laide," "In questa tomba," "Wonne der Wehmuth," etc.) with incorruptible intelligence and more than adequate voice. At the end, my impression is that the good doctor is an eminently scholarly performer, with very little interpretative flair or quickening imagination. Victor Graef's piano is well balanced with the voice, but the recording is a little over-live and forward for my taste. If the voice comes to the ear with so much power, it should have more warmth: this one clearly has some help along the way.

Something of a pearl among Poells is the voice of Eleanor Steber in a collection of so-called "Sacred" arias on Columbia ML 4521 (\$5.45). The sounds she produces in "With Verdure Clad" (Haydn), "Hear Ye, Israel" (Mendelssohn), "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth" (Handel), and Bach's "My Heart Ever Faithful" and "Weinen Klagen" are consistently ear-filling, sonorous, and well controlled, but without sufficient coloration, shading, or nuance. In the end, though she has every physical asset to perform such material splendidly, it has a bland kind of tonal varnish over it that gives everything the same transparent surface. "Hear Ye, Israel" is the closest Miss Steber comes to an emotional performance, and it is very close. Part of the blame must go to the non-assertive performance of the orchestral backgrounds under the direction of Max Rudolf, and an enveloping, nonfocused recorded sound in which the voice spreads out more than is desirable.

—IRVING KOLODIN.

VOX

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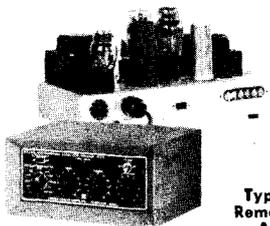
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Four Ten-Watters

MY sympathy goes to those readers who have been rushing to the nearest hi-fi sound salon to try out a dozen or so amplifiers, with the blithe hope that hearing is believing and a choice can be quickly made. I've been trying merely four ten-watters and I am quite deafened and so full of statistics a book would hardly hold them!

The first item in any useful comparison, and the hardest, is the elimination of variables. One thing at a time. Not just one system (though salesmen would play three or four simultaneously if they could get away with it) but one element. Speaker. Amplifier. Everything else must be rigidly "frozen"—not at all easy to do in these modern sales rooms with their inviting rows of switches and buttons to connect everything. Nevertheless, do it or suffer the consequences in utter confusion.

Furthermore, you can avoid confusing bottlenecks by making use of fancy equipment to help test. You know it's good. A cheap tape recorder, for example, may put more on its tape than it can get off via its own feeble suitcase audio system; feed it into a quality amplifier and speaker and you may be surprised at what you have. Worth knowing. Quality speakers show up the virtues (and deficiencies) of cheap amplifiers and, vice versa, a fine amplifier will give the speaker a chance to show off its own. Most sales rooms will do these comparisons for you if you are firm and keep a level head.

Now beware, finally, of irrelevant

traps, superficial matters such as volume and equalization. Above all, match volume for volume—or the louder system will tend to sound best, falsely. (Speakers especially should be compared thus. They vary in efficiency, but the loudest one is decidedly not automatically the best in tone.) Preamplifiers are not always equalized identically; fuller bass sound may involve no more than an inconsequent adjustment of the bass control knob. Balance your bass and highs, for comparison, and you will the better judge distortion and tonal range at the upper end and that cleanness and lack of "thump" which means good transient response in the bass.

My own home testing of the four amplifiers, using all of the above principles adding a fifth and top quality machine as a comparison standard, went a bit further, isolating the four amplifiers from their own preamplifiers since trouble can exist in each section independently. Thanks to the convenient push-in plugs now commonly used, I could feed my own top quality preamplifier into each of the four in turn, the Masco MA 10-HF, Thordarson 7 32 W10, Bogen DB 10, and Newcomb P-10-A (all in the \$55 range) by-passing their own preamplifiers. Then, the other way around, I fed each preamplifier directly into the fancy machine's power amplifier to see how these reacted, each by each. A simple test, if you can take the mental strain of so many comparisons. Just plug the "preamp output" of one into the "amp input" of another. You'll have to shift the speaker connections

