

The Two Bartóks

By ARTHUR BERGER

WHEN Bartók's "Contrasts" appeared on 78 rpm over a decade ago it was a recording landmark. Those were lean days for contemporary composers where recording opportunities were concerned. One would thumb through a catalogue from Bach to Beethoven without being conscious of anything much in between. The first two quartets and assorted piano pieces were all there were to keep record collectors informed of the progress of one of our big creative figures. That is why it was significant around 1940 when to this meager list was added a newly completed work recorded for Columbia by no less distinguished a trio than Szigeti, Benny Goodman, and the composer.

We have come a long way since, and with the Bartók list elongated as it is today it would scarcely seem necessary to do much more than note briefly that Bartók Records gets credit for the first LP version of "Contrasts" (Bartók 916, \$5.95) and that Columbia has followed it up promptly by transposing its 78-rpm version to the new speed to meet (or so it would seem) the competition (ML 2213, \$4). In the steady flow of Bartók recordings from the factories this is something to take as a matter of course, and one more indication of that abundance is the appearance, also within the last few months, of two recordings of the sonata for violin unaccompanied. For this is the work coupled with "Contrasts" on the Bartók LP and it is also on two sides of a London ten-incher (LS 711, \$4.95). Neither of these is the first LP version, since Menuhin, who commissioned the work, recorded it some years ago for RCA Victor.

In view of the superb results achieved by Bartók Records, both as concerns reproduction and performance, it would be unfair to limit ourselves here to just a few words of eulogy. It is important to underline the fact that though the young musicians responsible for these admirable readings were confronted with high standards in the earlier recordings of both "Contrasts" and the violin sonata, they have met the challenge thoroughly. Too often we pay lip service to the assumption that a celebrity must, of necessity, do

better than someone not so exalted. Robert Mann, violin, Stanley Drucker, clarinet, and Leonid Hambro, piano, are none of them "name artists" in the sense that Szigeti, Goodman, and Menuhin are. Yet all three of these young men are capable of holding their own in the company of the others. They have even profited from some of the limitations of the earlier readings, for even the top virtuosos may falter. Moreover, it takes several different readings and a period of absorption and trial and error before the ideal mode of performance for almost any given new work is approximated. Szigeti, Goodman, and Bartók have, as interpreters, their individual traits which we may enjoy; I do not mean to discredit the old recording as a means of praising the new one. But the young players also have their individuality, which takes the form of a certain youthful exuberance. Characteristic of modern youth, they are more conscious of recording principles, and I think I detect in them a keen sense of the balances that are conducive, in this highly recalcitrant blending of violin and clarinet, to the best reproduction. The engineers did the rest, placing the Columbia LP at a decided disadvantage.

Acoustically, the Menuhin recording too suffers much by comparison, and Mann's reading is noticeably more secure and poised. I have always been troubled by Menuhin's failure to articulate the answering voices in the fugue in such a way that the first two notes would have the same incisive, detached quality as in the original statement of the subject. Not only does Mann set us right on this detail, but he paces the fugue faster, much to its advantage. Mann, the first violinist of the Juilliard Quartet, which has been justly extolled for its recordings of all the Bartók quartets, knows how to apply the precise colors to sustain the extraordinary atmosphere of this composer's music. He does not stint on rhetorical pauses that are notated in the score and he sustains lines beautifully. There is urgency, too, in his reading. Wandy Tworin, whose name is new to me, is a violinist of no small facility, and his performance of the sonata on the London LP has a gypsy abandon appropriate to its improvisatory style. I was glad to see that he did not make

Menuhin's error in the fugue, but his reading falls considerably short of Mann's.

For my taste, the Bartók LP of "Contrasts" is worth the higher price of a twelve-inch disc if only for the violin sonata, which is more distinguished coupling than the early "Portrait," No. 1, and the folkish Rhapsody, No. 1, played by Szigeti on the reverse side of the Columbia LP. The sonata, rather than the trio, is the real musical substance of the disc. Neither work needs any introduction at this date, but the antipathy between them that becomes so very apparent when they are placed so close together sets in motion a train of thought in which we may be more lucid today than a decade ago, when both works were new. How is one to account for this double life that Bartók maintained in his music, shifting so drastically from the merely titillating, though resourceful, play on folk matter to the inwardness and scope of the sonata? It is a shift we find him making many times, occasionally even in the same work.

VIRTUALLY every composer of our century who has to any substantial degree had recourse to folk music for inspiration has come up from time to time with pieces that are no more ambitious, if more artfully executed, than the arrangements found in the average collections of folk dances or songs. But these pieces are more or less byproducts of the broader aim of distilling from the raw material in public domain a legitimate and pliable language for what may be called, for want of a better way to describe it, a composer's "more serious" style. The exercise a composer gets, while he writes these pieces, in coping directly with demotic sources enables him to understand them better.

But it is in proceeding from this stage, in assimilating the sources into his total idiom, that a composer attains the level of his important contribution. Thus it was that the folk heritage of Russia served merely as a portal for Stravinsky, up, at least, to 1923; and such, similarly, has been the function of British folk music for Vaughan Williams, or that of Provence for Milhaud. Copland's idiom is so thoroughly saturated with American folk influences, and jazz as an essential part of them, that even a work with the reputation of being so "abstract" as the Piano Variations conveys a certain aura of the colloquial, thoroughly transformed and apotheosized though it may be. Doubtless the experts can point to linear contours, modalities, melodic intervals, and rhythmic patterns derived from Bartók's intensive investigation of

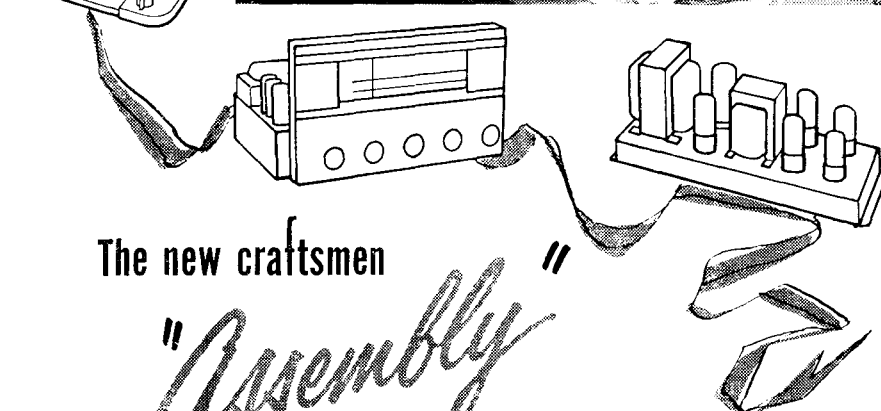
...representative works. Perhaps, too, as we become better acquainted with Bartók's vast output, we may apprehend some of these characteristics in passages that now seem related, if distantly, to the contemporary chromaticists rather than to folk sources. But this awareness will not alter materially the impression we have now that when Bartók taps folk materials he does so with a vengeance, and when he writes in his other style he leaves them quite far behind. By contrast, other composers of his stature who have also come under the influence of folklore have drawn much more closely to a fusion.

No purveyor of folk music, of course, has been more prolific than Bartók, who presented the rare combination of scholar, field-worker, and sensitive artist, and achieved an arranger's style as authentic as it is charming. But as with any commodity, flooding the market makes for devaluation, and the mere ease with which it may be processed in mass tells us something of its inner simplicity. "Contrasts" is more substantial and ingenious, to be sure, than the bulk of Bartók's folkish pieces. It is stylishly scored and its structure is not haphazard. But coming back to it after some time, I find it has given me about all the entertainment that it is capable of imparting. Moreover, my tolerance for Bartók's folk vein has been impaired by his many pieces in that vein which I have heard in the meantime. A sheaf of those pieces—no less than forty—entitled "For Children," Vol. 1, is, as a matter of fact, ready at hand in a current piano recording of Menahem Pressler (M-G-M E 3009, \$3). These are only a very, very modest portion of the total supply. And there are even some more of them on the current list, performed in very reliable fashion by Ilona Kabos somewhat in the spirit of a set of encores to a program of piano works by Hungary's two leading musical lights that has as its meat Kodály's "Piano Pieces," Opus 11 (Bartók LP 917, \$5.95).

The difference between this folk vein and Bartók's most profound and provocative style goes far beyond being simply one of mood or content. It is more like the difference between a "Hit Parade" song and a Bach fugue. I am perfectly aware of treading on controversial ground, but I feel we should all be fortified against the danger of assuming that because Bartók is the composer of both "Contrasts" and the unaccompanied violin sonata, the same level or type of attention and interest is to be exacted from the listener for the one as for the other.



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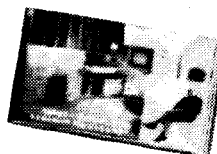
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The Authentic Version

By OSCAR BRAND

THERE IS A good possibility that John Jacob Niles's new LP albums (Boone-Tolliver BTR22 and BTR23, \$4 each) will turn the folk-music world upside-down—which may well be what the folk-music world needs.

The upheaval will not be caused by Niles's singing, though he does sound as if he had spent the afternoon at a local ball game ruining his vocal cords. It's the jacket notes that carry the devastating punch. Printed in clear black and white is the following statement: "We have carefully indicated what is composition, what is adaptation, what is traditional material pure and simple." In other words, the admission is made that many of Niles's songs are not "authentic." To compound this shock, the statement is followed by the warning, "All this material is fully protected by copyright and may not be reproduced in any manner or form without written permission . . ."

Another album of songs which has just been released will add to the excitement. In his introduction to "Folk Songs of Newfoundland" (Folkways FP831, \$4.45) singer Alan Mills reveals that the songs are "home-made" and that "in many cases the authors of the songs are known and some of them are still very much alive." Again, a few of the songs are protected by copyright.

And so the secret is out. Strong men will blanch and women grow faint to learn that new folk songs are being written on all sides. What will happen to the common belief that folk songs are created not by people, but by amorphous conglomerations known as "social groups"? How will the public weather the traumatic impact of the revelation that America's most respected folk singers have been rewriting the old songs or making up new ones to conform to the requirements of recording and radio, to audience expectation, or just to personal caprice?

What hero will dare hum "The Big Rock Candy Mountain" when he discovers that Burl Ives, not some anonymous hobo, arranged much of the music to the best-known version? Who will feel free to sing the last verses of "The Lincolnshire Poacher" or "The Eddystone Light" knowing

that Richard Dyer-Bennet is the author? And what wringing of hands will greet John Jacob Niles's proclamation that he is the author of "Go Away from My Window," the composer of "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair," and that he wrote "I Wonder as I Wander" with no help from the folk-song tradition save three bare lines recited by a young lady in Kentucky?

I can hear the gentle legalist inquiring, "And how does one copy-right a folk song?" All that is necessary to transfer a song from public domain to private ownership is proof of "a substantial change." John Allison wedded his own music to well-known American Revolutionary songs and, lo, they were his. If one sings the chorus—a later addition—of "Casey Jones," one is expected to pay homage and royalty to Shapiro, Bernstein, and Company.

The copyrighter is allowed twenty-eight years of ownership and another twenty-eight years after renewal. As a result, such old favorites as "Happy Birthday to You" and "Home on the Range" are still not public property. The many artists who recorded the lyric "Venezuela" discovered afterwards that remuneration was due its prolific composer—to wit, John Jacob Niles.

Why have honored folk singers perpetrated this "hoax" on the unsuspecting public? Why have they rewritten the grand old ballads or created grand new ballads in the old style? Well, they've merely followed the pattern of the past. Folk songs live by change. The "authentic version," recorded or printed in a folio, is like a butterfly pinned for exhibition. Captured in the moment of beauty, it may fade with time and never reproduce its loveliness.

New songs are written as circumstances require. The test of time and continued usage must be applied before a song can be considered "traditional," but folk-music fans are well known for their patience and fortitude. They are learning that a song needn't be sung always as it was sung the first time they heard it. The comment "That's not the way it goes" will be left to classical musicians and popular-music fans.

The final judgment must be based on the artistic merits of the song and the performance. Each balladeer's



—George Kossuth.

John Jacob Niles—"weird, hoarse falsetto."

reputation rests on his ability to entertain the many-headed mass which is the audience. Alan Mills fulfils the lively intentions of the bards who are writing the new folk songs of Newfoundland. John Jacob Niles writes and sings his own material in the practised tradition of the old minstrels.

THE Newfoundland songs lack the power and breadth of the Niles collection. They seem a little shiny and self-conscious, as if a few years of singing would make them wear better. Where Niles's balladry soars, the Mills songs merely bounce. But they have a vibrant sauciness that presages a long life. Alan Mills is Canada's favorite folk singer, and he brings a fine resounding voice to the singing that fits the muscular music of the Newfoundland fisherfolk.

The weird, hoarse falsetto of John Jacob Niles adds a strange power to some of his renditions. It heightens the dramatic intensity of the ballads "Mattie Groves" and "Barbery Allen." In a few of the songs, however, the queer delivery often overpowers the material, as in "The Lass from the Low Country" and "Oh, Waly, Waly." Yet listening to Niles is a fascinating experience. Certainly, no one will be bored.

The historian is welcome to his frozen folk songs. They help reveal the motives and aspirations of a by-gone day and often they may prove entertaining in a contemporary setting. But the Nileses and the Millses are welcome too, for as they sing the new songs and refashion the old they support the practice of balladry as a living, breathing art.