

Recordings in Review

All Out for Oistrakh

DVORAK: *Concerto in A minor*. David Oistrakh, violin, with Kiril Kondrashin, conducting; also GLAZOUNOV: *Concerto in A minor*. (Colosseum CRLP 137, \$5.95.)

RIMSKY-KORSAKOV: "Scheherezade." Oistrakh, with the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra, N. Golovangov conducting. (Colosseum CRLP 135, \$5.95.)

UNLESS Oistrakh has given more attention to the Glazounov Concerto than even such a master of it as he is likely to, this is the same superb performance issued some months ago on a Vanguard disc. For those who want two full sides of Oistrakh (the coupled work there was a cello concerto of Kabalevsky), the Colosseum issue will certainly appeal, though there must be a warning that the Dvorak is not nearly so well-recorded as the Glazounov.

It has its full complement of artificial highs and accentuated, wiry string tone, but the crossover remains uncooperative regardless of adjustment, and the roll-off won't. In short, it has been excessively doctored, and not too skilfully. Withal, it remains a singularly fine performance of the Dvorak, with an energy, a fire, a discipline Oistrakh imparts to anything of a virtuoso nature.

As for the Oistrakh version of the "Scheherezade" (which is described on the envelope as indicated above), it fulfils the jacket claim that "when a new recording of 'Scheherezade' makes history, it will be by reason of performance." But only to the extent that it is undoubtedly one of the poorest recordings of "Scheherezade" I have ever heard. And to speak of this



vague, muddy, colorless (not to say scratchy) reproduction as "new" makes one wonder to which "new" Five Year Plan its era belongs. I politely refrain from consideration of whether it is D. Oistrakh, J. Popkin, or V. Molotov who plays the solo violin part—but I have a fine "Don Quixote" (Strauss) by Beecham which might be worth reviving for Alfred Wallenstein's solo cello playing, and I can prove that he did it.

Falla's Puppet Show

FALLA: "El Retablo de Maese Pedro." Ernesto Halffter conducting a cast including Chano Gonzalo, Francisco Navarro, and Blanca Maria Seoane. (Westminster WL 5238, \$5.95.) F. Charles Adler conducting a cast including Waldemar Kmentt, Ilona Steingruber, and Otto Wiener. (SPA 43, \$5.95.) (The Westminster issue also includes "El Amor Brujo," with Pedro de Freitas Branco conducting and Ines de Rivadeneira, contralto.)

THE general ignorance of this Falla oddity would doubtless have gone on for years more, save for LP, that great restorer of the obscure, the overlooked, and the neglected. In this instance, the work merits all the descriptive words, for it has much of the composer's true character in it, even an allusion or two to scores better known than this one, which he wrote in 1923.

At that, it takes a bit of attentive listening, for much of the score was created to serve as background for a puppet-show derived from the second part of "Don Quixote" in which the mad cavalier intercedes to "save" Melisandra from the Moors who have captured her. However, both issues include the complete text (the Spa one is so badly printed it is virtually unreadable), and after a few times through the work the listener can provide his own action mentally.

On the whole, it is worth the effort, for the work is very closely written for a small orchestra of odd constitution, including a solo harpsichord, in the composer's highly stylized way. There is no overwhelming margin of favor for one version or the other, though in all respects the slight differences favor Westminster: Spanish singers rather than the German ones who do commendably enough for SPA, a smoother recording than the general good though slightly coarse SPA. Adler conducts with much rhythmic feeling, as does Ernesto Halffter.

In any case, the issue would be resolved by Spa's distribution of the work on two sides of the disc, whereas Westminster is able to offer a new version of "Love the Sorcerer" on side two. This is on the order of pretty good, rather than distinguished, because Freitas Branco favors slow tempi throughout, and though De Rivadeneira makes a magnificent effect in those passages which are suitable for her deep, dusky lower register, she is not possessed of enough vocal cultivation to do as well with the middle range. Moreover, it is "Parisian" Westminster, which means satisfactory but not outstanding recording.

Bartók by Karajan

BARTÓK: *Concerto for Orchestra*. Herbert von Karajan conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra. (Angel 35003, \$5.95.)

RECALLING the effect that Herbert von Karajan made with his version of the "Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta" (on a rather poorly recorded Columbia ML 4456), the results here give him rank as something of a Bartók specialist. He has an affinity for the fragmentary bits which make up the pieces from which the piece is built, a keen sense of tonal contrast, and—more than anything else—a driving rhythmic impulse. I would not say that he has fundamentally more of these qualities than Reiner or Van Beinum, but they are demonstrably evident in a recorded sound superior to that enjoyed by either of the others.

Moreover, he benefits from an educational process that has been going on steadily with these late works of Bartók, as it does with every substantial new work worthy of repeated hearings. Opinions on tempi and accentuations crystallize, the relationship of the instruments to each other becomes clarified, the listener gradually learns what to listen for, as well as to how it should sound. What I hear is a more fanciful mood a



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greater variety of color than has previously been offered in this work. The orchestral playing is exceptionally fine, the recording the best Angel has offered to date.

Prokofiev's "Classical"

PROKOFIEV: "Classical" Symphony. Ernest Ansermet conducting L'Orchestra de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire. (London LL 864, \$5.95.) Igor Markevitch conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra. (Angel 35008, \$5.95/4.95.) (With the former: Glinka's "Russlan and Ludmilla" Overture, Borodin's "Steppes of Central Asia," and Mussorgsky's "Night on the Bare Mountain"; with the latter: Dukas' "L'Apprenti Sorcier," Ravel's "La Valse," and Falla's "Three Cornered Hat" Dances.)

THE meeting ground of these discs in parallel performances of Prokofiev's "Classical" Symphony may not be quite the point of relationship it superficially appears. That is to say, if one cherishes the sequence of music chosen by Ansermet, the merits or limitations of his Prokofiev *vis-à-vis* Markevitch's are not likely to seem inordinately important. On the other hand, the success or failure of Markevitch with this endeavor is rather crucial, for all the other works he offers exist in attractive combinations.

On the whole, Markevitch comes off well in this competition, for Ansermet's instinct for the meticulous and the precision-ground inclines him to stress the "classical" elements in Prokofiev's score (especially in the *largo*) whereas Markevitch gives incisiveness and thrust to the specifically Prokofievian elements in the work. In all the pieces, indeed, Markevitch is a conductor of force and strongly marked lines, albeit a little at the expense of the fantasy content of the Dukas and Ravel works. Excellent recording, too.

However, it will be a staunch music lover who will be able to resist the splendor of sound and the justice of feeling which Ansermet provides for the Glinka, Borodin, and Mussorgsky items which make up the second side of his disc. The London engineers have come up with something new again, as it sounds to my ear, in a more vibrant blend of winds and strings than has been customary, even with them. I would guess the Telefunken mike or its equivalent has a part in this. It is a product of the auditorium of the Maison de la Mutualité, in which London has done other notable work, but none as good as this.

—IRVING KOLODIN.

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"Tristan" in Toto

By ROBERT LAWRENCE

IN making the complete "Tristan und Isolde," recorded last year in England, available to the American public in an album equipped with good critical notes and background material (LM 6700, \$27.25). RCA Victor has done a valuable service. There can be no doubt that for years to come this will be the authoritative "Tristan" for the gramophone. Enlisting the services of Kirsten Flagstad and Ludwig Suthaus in the title roles, with Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting the Philharmonic Orchestra, the recording presents some of the best Wagnerian performing elements available today. Blanche Thebom is the Brangaene; Josef Greindl (once briefly of the Metropolitan) the King Marke; and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, noted in the album as a rising German baritone, twenty-eight years of age, the Kurvenal. The brief ensembles of the first act are sung by the chorus of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden; and the small parts of the invisible sailor and of the shepherd are taken by Rudolf Schock, who has been doing major assignments recently in a good many Central European opera houses.

With such a cast and conductor, abetted by a wide range of tone and dynamics in the reproduction, the recording is prevailingly successful. On the set that I received, the needle jumped once (on a powerful high note) and a slow vibrato on another side set the pitch off-center momentarily; but these are minor mechanical drawbacks in the face of a considera-

ble achievement both in performance and engineering.

"Tristan und Isolde" gains rather than loses when transferred from the stage to the living room. There is little outward action in this work. The drama is interior, better suited to reflection than to visual intake; and, when addressed to the ear alone it takes on added stature. Even that supreme miscalculation in the opera house—the entrance of Marke at the climax of the love duet and his subsequent speech—becomes, in the re-



corded version, a great musical climax; for, evidently, Wagner was thinking here not in terms of the stage as we know it, but rather of a tonal sphere in which emotional high points are absolute rather than theatrical. Then, too, there is another advantage to a recorded "Tristan": one can concentrate on a single act at a time, laying the others aside until full power of absorption has been regained. For listening to "Tristan" can be an exhausting experience.

From the first notes of the Prelude, one feels in the conducting of Wilhelm Furtwängler a sense of complete dedication, a mastery of nuance, of dynamic ebb and flow. It is a pity, in the light of these positive achievements, that his work should too often lack that quality of pacing so essential to music in any medium, be it operatic or symphonic. More than once, in the course of this otherwise flawless reading, one feels a strong desire to change from the local to the express. The first act takes almost half again as long as performances of the same unit (which has always been presented uncut) at the Metropolitan. While most of the tempi followed by Artur Bodanzky and his New York successors have generally been on the brisk side, the difference in overall timing between their work and that of Furtwängler does seem somewhat excessive. In at least two places on the current recording the music is so slowly paced that the fabric disinte-

grates. For example, one is grateful to hear that ravishing portion of the love duet, "Doch, unsere Liebe, heisst sie nicht Tristan und Isolde?," usually cut, restored to its rightful place in the score, but not at a spavined gait resembling slow motion; and the feverish episode of the third act, wherein Tristan tears off his bandages, is listless rather than delirious.

Even with this one major defect, Furtwängler handles his dynamic changes notably. Wherever Wagner indicates a gradual intensification or slackening, the conductor meets the requirement so subtly as to make the transition almost imperceptible. One could only wish that Furtwängler's grasp of the pacing as a whole had equaled his mastery of individual effects.

Kirsten Flagstad, as Isolde, duplicates her own best performances in the opera house. The two high C's of the second act are spliced in with the voice of another singer (said on reliable authority to be that of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf), but all other passages are taken with authority and prime vocal condition by the famous soprano. For one listener's taste, this has always been an Isolde lacking in ideal interpretative play and dynamic range, but mine is admittedly a minority report. The splendor of Mme. Flagstad's voice and the vitality of her performances have won her an uncontested place in our time. In this recording her many admirers will find the artist still at her best.

Blanche Thebom, as Brangaene, is adequate and often expressive; but she, like Mme. Flagstad, darkens her vocal color so constantly as to make the score more often monumental than moving. Ludwig Suthaus, when he sings softly or in half voice, is an admirable Tristan, conveying a full measure of the poetry inherent in the score. The passages commanding full tone find him unfortunately overweighted, with the quality of the voice itself changed to a strident timbre.

Josef Greindl is a good, routine Marke singing expressively if with a somewhat dry tone. Rudolf Schock is excellent as the shepherd; but the revelation of this recording is young Fischer-Dieskau as Kurvenal. More than one artist who promised well on discs has disappointed in a personal appearance; but it is to be hoped that while this baritone is still young and in first-class condition he might be brought to this country. Not in many years has one heard such fine Wagnerian singing, in which beauty of tone is coupled with complete mastery of the text. The voice itself is a very notable instrument, with a brilliant ring all too welcome in an era of dark and nommous notato-tones

