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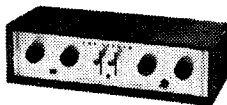
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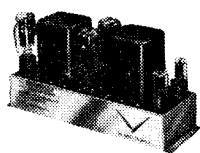
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## Bellissima Bellini, Erratic Puccini

AS OFTEN as one comes upon the greatness of such a forgotten work as "I Puritani" (Angel 35035-6-7, \$17.85/14.85), one is prompted again to consider the selective process of history and how it operates. Whether "Puritani" would wear as well, over as long a time, as "Lucia di Lammermoor" I hope is never subjected to a test. But allowing for all the impact of its fresh melodic spurt, for the unfamiliar rise and fall of its line, the judgment has to be that it is far greater music than "Lucia."

Why, then, does one persist and the other languish? "Puritani" has no such eartickling matter as the "Sextet," to be sure. But the answer is, I think, that "Lucia" demands an easier kind of specialized vocal technique than "Puritani," that it has been kept alive by the Melbas, Tetrzzinis, Galli-Curcis, Pagliughis, and Ponses, one of whom seems always to be coming when another is going. (We don't have a very good Lucia today, but we have good enough ones to make a performance possible.)

"Puritani," however, is a purposeless venture unless you have a dramatic soprano with a florid top, capable of high D's and E flats; a tenor who can live on the high level of A's and B's constantly, and make a real effect with a top D in "Vieni, fra queste braccia"; a mezzo who can color her tones and sing a florid phrase now and then; an acting bass-baritone who can sing legato, not to mention a conductor with the command of a style generally forgotten today.

The odd, exciting thing about Angel's initial operatic venture is that it has all these things in almost dazzling abundance. I don't say that Maria Meneghini Callas is an all-time great soprano or Giuseppe di Stefano is another Bonci, but they do a thoroughly convincing work of making one see the light of Bellini's creative flame; and that cannot be accomplished by microphone tricks or echo chambers. The fact is that, between them, Callas and Di Stefano do some of finest singing Italy has offered us since the war—in large part, I would say, due to the authoritative direction of Serafin.

Substantially speaking, this is my introduction to the art of Callas, and a highly persuasive one it is. It is a voice of curiously impersonal timbre,

suggestive somewhat of Onegin's in her later years. But whatever she does, Callas does with style, with musicianly feeling, with a sense of line and dramatic purpose. Thus, one can listen to her as a fine instrumentalist performing with sure technique, whether or not one likes the exact quality of sound his instrument produces. I find her effective throughout in suggesting that dead, disembodied quality of madness that Markova brings to her "Giselle." The dancer does it by limp-appearing actions, unvital gestures: the singer does it with cool, white vocal tone and very little vibrato. A striking further parallel is that Bellini's kind of sadly mad music is a very powerful precursor of Adam's style in "Giselle" a dozen years later.

Of the others, Di Stefano has never sung so well in anything, operating in true vocal character and mostly with good vocal manners. It is evident, periodically, that he doesn't have the technique to get the most from his beautiful voice, but the sound is mostly suave, fresh, and expressive, with some exceptional high points. Nicola Rossi-Lemeni is a fine Sir Giorgio, commanding a real legato when he doesn't push for volume, Rolando Panerai is a baritone to mark for future attention, Carlo Forti (Lord Walton) is first class, and Aurora Cattalani fulfils the difficult assignment of being Callas's opposite number in the mezzo range with notable artistry.

Altogether Angel has here shown



Tullio Serafin—"authoritative direction."

much of the same understanding of the operatic problem that Cetra-Soria did in some of its outstanding sets, for the obvious reason (Dario Soria is as active in the new company as he was in the old). That includes a thoroughly effective literary presentation, beginning with an excellent essay on the work by Francis Toye, continuing with a full libretto well translated by William Fense Weaver. The sound is good enough to be left for mention to the last. Its rating, I would say, is B plus, or even A minus.

**R**ECALLING Victor de Sabata as the firebrand of the concert halls, literally committing musical arson during his short eventful tour of duty in this country a few years ago, it is odd to find him in charge of a "Tosca" (Angel 35060-1, \$11.90/\$9.90) that dawdles uncomfortably in Acts I and III, drawing out every lush phrase to unheavenly lengths. Act II is decidedly better, since it has its own built-in drama, so to speak, which gets under De Sabata's skin with rousing results. The whole opera is much better prepared, in details of instrumental playing, tone quality, balance, etc., than is customary in opera recordings from Italy, save those by London.

In terms of vocalization, neither Callas (Tosca) nor Di Stefano (Cavaradossi) is as good as in "Puritani," or, perhaps, it is merely a matter of having a more accessible framework for comparison. Callas brings a strong personal accent to her Tosca, and it might be quite another story on the stage, but it is, in the main, not as good to listen to as Tebaldi's. However, it is decidedly better in Act II than in Act I, with her ample top a valuable asset in the climaxes where most sopranis must be content with gasps, and a really well planned "Vissi d'arte." Contrariwise, Di Stefano is better in Acts I and, especially, III than he is in the drama-packed middle act. To complete a rather erratic vocal graph, Tito Gobbi lacks the kind of vocal resource desirable for a Scarpia on discs, though one gets a strong dramatic impact from his presentation.

If one has been looking to this Angel product for a definitive "Tosca," the answer has to be that it isn't. Of present-day recordings the London-Tebaldi is preferable, as the RCA-Gigli is of yesterday's. For those who are bargain-minded, mention may be made of the old Columbia Molajoli-conducted set, which has been reissued on the Entré label (EL-4). Its virtues were never more than modest, but the present price (\$7.57) is much more in keeping with them than the original cost. —IRVING KOLODIN.

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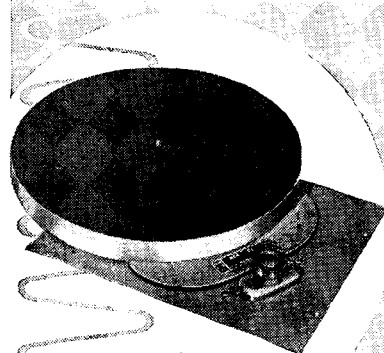
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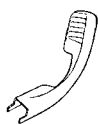
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## HITS AND MISSES

### Vive Josephine!

THIS month I have considered selling out and moving to Martinique, birthplace of the Empress Josephine. The provocation is an LP "Dance Music of Martinique" (Dial 402) by L'Orchestre Select-Tango and L'Orchestre Creole Folklorique. We are assured by the jacket notes that these outfits play in "an 1890ish structure with flaking yellow paint, galvanized metal roof, pulpit bandstand, and wormy balcony from which rum-drinking table sitters look down upon the dancers." It is also encouraging to read that while the tempos may suggest "frantic gyrations," the fact is that the performances of "the dance-minded and *demi-monde*" of Fort-de-France are actually a matter of "the belly or pelvis with a great deal of hip and knee action, the couples facing, arms linked about the partner's waist, and a minimum of foot action."

One can scarcely blame them. What comes off the bandstand is well nigh seraphic; it seems clear that the troubles of the great, grievous world have as yet failed to disturb the air of the "Select-Tango" dance hall. The key to the business is lovely, languid clarinet playing in a variety of rhythms, backed by some wonderfully simple, basic trombone and a rhythm section with "conventional drums, guitar, cello (played *pizzicato*), and *cha-cha*, a cylinder of rolled tin filled with hard pebbles, which is vigorously shaken by the percussionist." This all results in the happiest marriage of French, African, and Carib cultures, the forms including beguines, mazurkas, waltzes, and a gallop. I would like to know the names of the players, and am indebted to them for one of the freshest musical experiences I have had for some time.

Three piano items are of interest. Willie "The Lion" Smith is a talkative Harlem personality and cigar smoker who is fond of alluding to his European sojourns while operating delightfully at the keyboard. He has put together a mixed ragtime treat in "Harlem Memories" (Dial 305) which includes a good deal of Willie's gab as well as the skilful impersonation of many uptown players.

I am on previous record as finding Erroll Garner's piano work full of unpleasant rhythmic mannerisms (es-

pecially a kind of clobbering repetitiveness). But one thing may be said for Garner. Somewhere in his changeable playing there is apt to be something for any taste. He can scintillate. He can modernize. He can pour on a high-viscosity *schmalz*. He can be cool or hot, mahogany or magenta. He can be heard in all these phases in a new twelve-inch LP bearing his own name (Columbia CL 535) and devoted to just six numbers: "Caravan," "No Greater Love," "Avalon," "Lullaby of Birdland," "Memories of You," and "Will You Still Be Mine?" My own favorite passages are his bravura attack on "Caravan" and the subsequent modern-style sections of this interpretation.

THE CALIFORNIA modernists are in again with what may be called an elegant trumpet work in the newer modes. This is an LP by the Chet Baker Quartet (Pacific PJLP-6). Baker is certainly an elegant player and oftentimes a vigorous one; at other times he strikes me as rather wan. I wish he would more frequently toot that thing. But in his idiom he is very appealing and he is accompanied by a superb pianist, Russ Freeman, and by Carson Smith, bass, and Larry Bunker, drums. The numbers range between Freeman originals and Jerome Kern's "All the Things You Are."

Baker is also the trumpeter of the Gerry Mulligan Quartet, with Mulligan himself on the baritone saxophone, string bass, and drums. They have a 45-rpm offering (Pacific EP4-7) which carries on their light, lucid chamber jazz tradition with versions, among other tunes, of "Love Me or Leave Me" and "Tea for Two." I must say that I was a little put out by some rhapsodic prose, accompanying photographs of the quartet, on the jacket. A sample will suffice: "Stands the bowman, Sagittarius to the room's rime. Above him in the light, electric necessity strains its black ear down toward the great weapon of this archer of mute thunder. As the pallid squares of deadener slip into shadows, the bassist fingers his momentary beard of bow and cat . . ."

He can really play it, too.

—WILDER HOBSON.