

Music to My Ears

SZELL ON HOME TERRITORY—TOSCANINI'S "PICTURES"—PETERS AS SOPHIE

CLEVELAND.

ONE might assume that the George Szell one hears conducting such a very good orchestra as the New York Philharmonic-Symphony is the same George Szell one would hear conducting any other very good orchestra. But after hearing him conduct his own very good orchestra in this city one would have cause for another opinion. In a program that included a Handel Concerto Grosso, Honegger's "Monopartita," and the C major Symphony of Schubert, Szell's work had a roundness of style, a uniformity of result quite striking.

Neither the Handel (which is for strings and organ) nor the Honegger (an episodic work without too consistent a texture) cast much light on just what sort of orchestra Szell has created here; but the Schubert was thoroughly illuminating. It is an orchestra with much more of a "family" feeling than most of those we hear in New York; that is, one is conscious not so much of individual choirs or individual desk soloists as of a unity of feeling, a similarity of response associated with the best chamber-music playing. The sound is velvety rather than plush or silken (as some more famous groups have been described) and it is fine-grained.

Actually, I cannot recall a playing of this Schubert symphony by another American orchestra that gave more rounded satisfaction than this one by Szell and his Clevelanders. Not the most intensely poetic conception one could imagine nor the most emotionally exuberant, it was nevertheless fastidiously organized, with a lightness of musical displacement eminently suited to a work often overweighted with "meaning." No doubt a good deal of this has to do with the sounding area of Severance Hall, whose thick carpeting could make heavy and dead a musical performance not precisely overproduced to achieve the net effect wanted.

To my ears it seems that Szell has blended a European sense of personal participation in orchestral playing with an American instinct for instrumental virtuosity (especially in the wind instruments) which has produced a new hybrid among orchestral stock. His relaxed, authoritative presence in Cleveland made one aware anew that where guest conductors in New York are concerned, it is more

often the guest that makes the host at home, rather than vice versa.

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Though Arturo Toscanini conducted the Ravel transcription of Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" in New York as long ago as March 1929 (when it was preceded on a Philharmonic program by the Second Symphony of Beethoven and followed by nothing less than the "Pines of Rome"), his favor to it since has been sufficiently intermittent to make its appearance on a recent NBC Symphony broadcast a command to the attention. Whether as a statement of Mussorgsky's intentions or Ravel's masterful elaboration of them, this was a performance hardly surpassable in vividness, detail, and imaginative power.

As a tonal restorer of these "Pictures," Toscanini seemed to be working for two effects simultaneously—the expressive content in Mussorgsky's response to the original inspirations of Hartmann, the coloristic values in Ravel's expression of them through the orchestra. Such a detail as the kind of vibrato the trumpet (wonderfully played by Harry Glantz) should produce for the effect he wanted in "Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyl" was microscopically studied; not to mention the clucking of the woodwinds in imitation of the chicks in the

"Ballad of the Unhatched Chicks" or the massive brass chords which made an almost visible thing of the final "Great Gate at Kiev."

Transferring such values to the score of "Boris" gave one some conception, mentally, of what Toscanini's treatment of this work must have been thirty-five and more years ago. A more than casual compliment is in order for the NBC Symphony musicians, who produced a sound in this "Pictures" to leave no air space for improvement.

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Roberta Peters's rating as a replacement moved a notch higher recently when she interceded on behalf of the ailing Hilde Gueden to sing Sophie in "Der Rosenkavalier." This role is decidedly more a nerve-tester than Gilda in "Rigoletto" or Zerlina in "Don Giovanni," which Miss Peters had previously sung on short notice, but it did not find her wanting in musical resource, a strong sense of the part, and believable action.

The purity of sound Miss Peters produced, the loving articulation of the vocal line (as well as her easy ascent to its top tones) could give her rank with the Metropolitan's best Sophies, with appropriate opportunity to broaden her hold on its dramatic elements. But in a cast of Astrid Varnay, Risé Stevens, and Lorenzo Alvary (Ochs), Peters was by no means the least credible. Alvary's careful performance had moderate vocal virtue, but a rather dead and undistinguished manner of making the Baron's character plausible.

—IRVING KOLODIN.



George Szell—"authoritative presence."

Record Week

FOR a man who has been confronted with the rigors of Italian opera since 1914, Beniamino Gigli is nothing if not durable. Though he will reach his sixty-third birthday next month, he is still a regular—and welcome—recitalist in England and on the Continent. Gigli's golden years, however, were in the 1930's, when he had matured as a musician and was still in full command of his remarkable vocal gifts, and it was during this decade that he had the good fortune to take part in several complete recordings of operas dear to every Italian tenor's heart.

I ascribe the good fortune to Gigli (although it is ours as well) because these opera recordings undoubtedly constitute his main claim to the attention of posterity. In isolated recorded arias Gigli all too often fell

into the typical excesses of Italian tenorism: he tore a passion to tatters, sobbed inordinately, indulged in gratuitous portamenti, and in general put a sumptuous voice to vulgar musical ends. (His recording of "Dalla sua pace" vies with Galvany's acoustic "Queen of the Night Aria" as the worst Mozart recording of all time.) But in the full-length operas, with a whole score in which to exploit a range of vocal effects and an unfolding drama in which to blow off histrionic steam, Gigli emerges as a balanced artist, knowing full well how to make the most of every phrase—be it the climax of an aria or an insignificant bit of parlando—and maintaining throughout a sense of dramatic urgency and musical logic.

The complete "Pagliacci," which was recorded in 1934 and has just been reissued on LP (RCA Victor LCT 6010, \$11.44), demonstrates this persuasively. In an effectively restrained "Vesti la giubba" Gigli lets the music make its own point and refrains from applying the usual superfluous lachrymose comments. But there is passion and power in abundance where it is needed, as in the tremendous outburst in Act II, "Ah! tu mi sfidi!" at the point where Nedda tries to re-establish the levity of the Pagliaccio-Arlecchino comedy. Unfortunately, except for Franco Ghione's tightly drawn conducting, this recording is Gigli's show alone. The Tonio (Mario Basiola) and the Nedda (Iva Pacetti) are adequate in the give-and-take of the plot; neither is able to rise fully to the demands of the big lyrical scenes. However, "Pagliacci" is a tenor's opera, and the Gigli encountered in this recording was a tenor who knew what to do with it.

"Madama Butterfly" is decidedly not a tenor's opera, but whatever music Puccini did allot to Lieutenant B. F. Pinkerton is handled with such loving care by Gigli in the complete recording (RCA Victor LCT 6006, \$11.44) that even the shortest of phrases is molded into a becoming and appropriate pattern. His soprano partner, Toti Dal Monte, may not be to everybody's taste. She has a smallish voice, rather shrill at the top, which is suitable to the girl of fifteen that Butterfly is supposed to be, if not to the passionate Latin *amorosa* that one has grown to expect. But with the unconventional sound goes a musical fastidiousness and intelligence rarely encountered in opera singers, voluptuous or otherwise. Other plus values in this set are the incisive conducting by Fabritiis and a level of reproduction that was superb in its day (1939) and is quite acceptable now.

—ROLAND GELATT.

SR Goes to the Movies

AU MOULIN ROUGE



—From "Moulin Rouge."

Colette Marchand and Jose Ferrer —"lugubrious, tired dwarf, humorless and pathetic."

WHEN I attended a viewing of "Moulin Rouge," John Huston's new movie (United Artists), I sat in the balcony behind a man who kept sending up, directly in my line of vision, great clouds of cigar smoke. At first I thought the haze was having an effect on the Technicolor photography, toning down harshnesses, now and then giving a visual effect similar to that of Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings and posters. Half an hour later, when the cigar was smoked out, the last haziness dissipated, I found to my pleasant surprise that the effect of the Technicolor persisted. I wiped my glasses, just to make sure they were not misted over, and tried again. It is with some certainty, then, that I can report the color photography of "Moulin Rouge" to be a considerable advance over any I have yet seen, thus bearing out the conclusions of *Life* Magazine of a few weeks back. *Life* would have appeared to have a sort of vested interest in the color process, since one of its own photographers, Eliot Elisofon, was retained by Huston as a color consultant. However, the magazine was simply giving credit where

credit was due. Using filters and what Mr. Huston has described as "some tricks," Elisofon has helped to make "Moulin Rouge" a more enjoyable experience than it might otherwise have been.

Having said this much, I must regretfully go on to state that "Moulin Rouge" has little else to claim one's attention. The first few moments of a very long two hours are devoted to festivities at the Moulin Rouge; these have some liveliness. But it isn't long before an unrelieved turgidity settles over the movie, a soporific quality heralded by the entrance of Zsa Zsa Gabor, who—in an absolutely harrowing choice by the producers—has been given the role of Jane Avril, subject of one of the most famous of Lautrec's posters as well as a celebrated music-hall performer of her time. Zsa Zsa, I regret to say, does little in the way of acting, dancing, or singing (a voice is dubbed in for her song numbers).

Having seen Zsa Zsa, I was more prepared for the misfortunes which were to come. One of these involves Jose Ferrer, who, it appears, has long had a fervent and misguided passion