

# The "Ring" Stolen Again

WAGNER: "*Der Ring des Nibelungen*" (complete). (Allegro 3125-43, \$56.05.)

WHO is pulling whose leg? This curious production was first announced in a Record Corporation of America advertisement in the March issue of Schwann's cumulative LP catalogue. The announcement was laconic: a complete recording—the first—of Wagner's "*Ring des Nibelungen*" was available on nineteen Allegro discs at the price indicated above. Where had it been made, and by whom? To these and other questions no answers were given, and the interested reader was free to speculate on the possibilities.

Three came at once to mind: (1) the performances had been taped behind the Iron Curtain, in Dresden or Leipzig or even, possibly, in East Berlin; (2) they had been taped, legitimately or otherwise, in West Germany, from performances originating in Munich or Frankfurt or Hamburg or Stuttgart or Berlin or elsewhere (but if so, why the anonymity of the announcement?); (3) they had been taped from Metropolitan Opera broadcasts of the "*Ring*" during the 1950-51 season.

Though the third of these alternatives was the most alluring (it would have involved a Flagstad Brünnhilde), probabilities favored the first, which received additional support from the labeling of the records and the albums when, presently, these were placed on sale. For here the performing forces were identified as "Soloists, Choir, and Orchestra of the Dresden State Opera, Conductor Fritz Schreiber." But almost at once, as one listened, doubts arose which at the end of approximately fifteen hours amounted to virtual certainties. This was no legitimate recording of the "*Ring*," made with the knowledge and cooperation of the performers; it was quite obviously taped, and amateurishly taped at that, from broadcast performances in which a number of old friends had been involved.

Technical considerations first:

The recording had many characteristics of a pick-up from an AM radio broadcast on nonprofessional equipment by nonprofessional operators. What one heard was almost certainly a performance in a theatre—audience and stage noises testified to that—but not of a performance recorded on the

spot with professional equipment and know-how. At intervals of about thirty minutes breaks occurred in the continuity: a single tape recorder had been used, and it had been necessary periodically to reverse or change reels. (These breaks may be located, in the "*Die Walküre*" recording, at bar 8, page 34; bar 17, page 74; bar 3, page 111; bar 8, page 171; bar 4, page 237; and bar 10, page 302. References are to the Breitkopf & Härtel vocal score.)

Each break entailed the loss of from seven to fourteen measures, or about thirty seconds of music. And no effort had been made to effect tidy splices. The typical tape recorder designed for nonprofessional use accommodates seven-inch reels and has a maximum tape-travel of 7.5 inches per second (thirty inches per second is the preferred professional speed); about thirty minutes of music can thus be recorded on a single tape without change or reversal of the reel. The coincidence was suggestive. And there was further evidence that the origin of this recording was a radio broadcast: frequent and often abrupt variations of level, attributable to vagaries of transmission or reception or manipulation, and the intrusion of sounds from adjacent broadcast bands (e.g. "*Siegfried*," Act I, pages 124-6).

Very well. The performances had been taped from broadcasts. But where had they taken place, and when?

There were clues: did not the Wotan sound suspiciously like Hans Hotter, the Siegmund like Ramon Vinay, the Sieglinde like Regina Resnik, the Brünnhilde like Martha Mödl? Where and when had these singers appeared together in a performance of the "*Ring*"? At Bayreuth, during the summer of 1953. Attribution became easy, especially after the receipt of corroborative testimony from Hotter, Vinay, and Resnik. This was to all intents and purposes a recording of the "*Ring*" taped from broadcasts of the first Bayreuth cycle of 1953.

The conductor of that cycle was not "Fritz Schreiber" (who is Fritz Schreiber?), and the performers were not the "soloists, choir, and orchestra of the Dresden State Opera." They were the chorus and orchestra of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus and the following singers (given, as the programs say, in the order of their appearance): Woglinde—Erika Zim-



Regina Resnik—"corroborative testimony."

mermann; Wellgunde—Hetty Plümacher; Flosshilde—Gisele Litz; Alberich—Gustav Neidlinger; Fricka—Ira Malaniuk; Wotan—Hans Hotter; Donner—Hermann Uhde; Freia—Bruni Falcon; Fasolt—Ludwig Weber; Fafner—Josef Greindl; Loge—Erich Witte; Mime—Paul Kühn; Erda—Maria von Ilsovay; Sieglinde—Regina Resnik; Siegmund—Ramon Vinay; Hunding—Greindl; Brünnhilde—Martha Mödl; Siegfried—Wolfgang Windgassen; Forest Bird—Rita Streich; the Three Norns—Mmes. von Ilsovay, Malaniuk, Resnik; Gunther—Uhde; Guttrune—Hinsch Gröndahl; Hagen—Greindl; Waltraute—Malaniuk. The conductor was Joseph Keilberth.

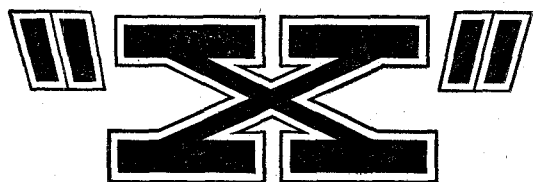
HERE, at the moment of writing, the matter stands; but possibly before this report appears in print there will have been developments. The burden of proof in any case rests on the Record Corporation of America (not to be confused, by the way, with another RCA—the more circumspect Radio Corporation of America).

The burden of shame rests there too, and may be as difficult to dislodge. For, regardless of its origin, this recording is of deplorable quality—far from a bargain, even at \$2.95 per record, even in a cut-rate market. Except in the performance itself, there is no professionalism here. The compression of frequencies; the coarseness and imbalance of sound; the constant, abrupt, and disconcerting variations of level; the crudity of editing; the alterations of pitch: the sum of these is an indecent travesty of Wagner, of the "*Ring*," of Bayreuth, and of the often splendid individual accomplishments of all the unhappy artists unwittingly involved.

—EDWARD CUSHING.

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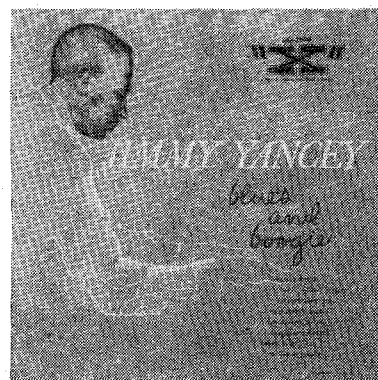
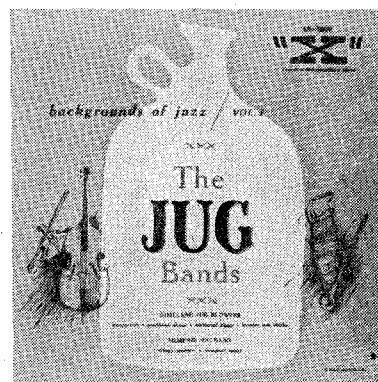
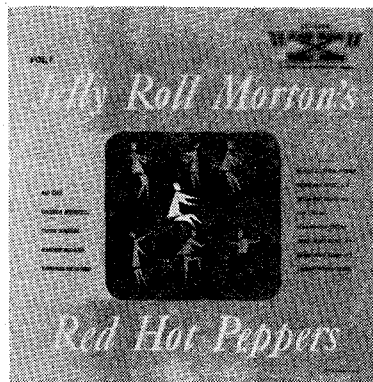
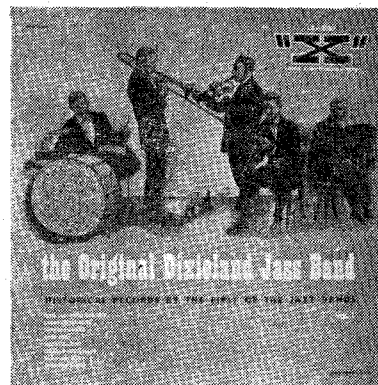
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# Recordings in Review

## Light from Vienna

MENDELSSOHN: *Octet in E flat (Opus 20). The Vienna Octet.* (London LL 869, \$5.95.)

ONE would not think, spontaneously, of Vienna as a source of illumination on this (or any other) work of Mendelssohn, but it strikes me as the most closely studied, wholly realized performance of the Octet I have heard, on records or in the concert hall. It adds to the generally precise and well articulated one in the Vox catalogue (by an ensemble headed by Henry Merckel) a degree of enthusiasm rarely matched in recorded performance and a surge of sound decidedly rewarding.

For all the promise of the first part of the first movement and the solid achievement of the scherzo, the Octet has always seemed to me a work in which the seventeen-year-old Mendelssohn was pursuing visions beyond his capacity to make compelling on paper. Here, however, is a clear answer to the contrary, for the team headed by Willi Boskovsky (with Günther Breitenbach as first viola and Nikolaus Hubner as leading cello) make much of customarily ignored subtleties. The players have a solid sense of the structure throughout, and the climaxes—including the rather remarkable one in the fugal finale—make their full effect.

Hearing this broadly sonorous pattern unfold makes one aware that most performances of the Octet are by players who do not play together regularly, thus leaving some questions of balance and integration unsolved, for all the good will or effort expended. Thanks to clever grouping around the microphone, the sound has an almost binaural element of direction, together with a degree of resonance seldom equaled in string recording.

## "Lohengrin" from Bayreuth

WAGNER: *"Lohengrin."* Joseph Keilberth conducting the orchestra and chorus of the Bayreuth Festival, with Eleanor Steber, Astrid Varnay, Hermann Uhde, Wolfgang Windgassen, and Josef Greindl. (London LLA 16, \$29.75.)

IF BAYREUTH of the present era is to mean as much to those who haven't been there as it is to those who have, some better means of pre-

senting the evidence of accomplishment must be worked out than this kind of decidedly imperfect recording. "Actual performances" may provide the working materials under suitable circumstances, but sessions for the specific purpose of recording would be much better. As we hear it, London would have had considerably more material to work with had not the local technicians switched recording techniques when the English supervisors were off on another job. As a result, they were limited to the tapes of a couple of performances rather than having full range of everything that was sung and played.

The mechanical faults show up in faulty balance, lack of proper relation of voices to voices and voices to orchestra, a practical blackout of everything else when the chorus is singing toward the end of Act II, and insufficient forethought in planning the pickup of singers who are also acting. The plain fact is that Wieland Wagner and those who influence him must stop considering a recording as a necessary evil and regard it as a vital adjunct of the whole future of Bayreuth, if the artistic possibilities latent in the work that is being done there are going to be realized.

In substance, this is a "Lohengrin" of certain notably fine elements—the Ortrud of Astrid Varnay, the Telramund of Hermann Uhde, and the conducting of Keilberth—and others of vacillating quality, such as Eleanor Steber's Elsa, Wolfgang Windgassen's Lohengrin, and the King of Josef Greindl. But with the unique sonority of the Bayreuth orchestra and chorus it should be much more than it is.

In certain isolated stretches—the bitter interchange of Ortrud and Telramund in Act II, particularly—this is operatic art on a high level. But Miss Steber never develops a consistent dramatic characterization, and Windgassen is guilty of such an inconsistent musical one as to discourage anything more than modest enthusiasm. In terms of the story itself, justice to "Lohengrin" cannot be provided by "magic" in the name

of Bayreuth. We are entitled to ask for something better than this.

## Kreisler and Paganini

KREISLER: *Quartet in A minor*; PAGANINI: *Quartet in E major. Stuyvesant String Quartet.* (Philharmonia PH 107, \$5.95.)

ABOUT the only fault to be found with this publication and pairing is that it might seem more logically to belong on the "Stradivarius" label. Aside from this lapse in terminology, it is in every way a successful combination of affectionate performance, first-class engineering, and excellent processing down to a good literary presentation by Peter Hugh Reed of the background of two works hardly as well known as they might be.

Oddly, though Paganini is the more durably celebrated composer, his work is the lesser known of the two. It is hard to characterize, as to school, though it has more affinity with Haydn, perhaps, than with any other composer well known to us even though it did not appear in print until after Paganini's death in 1840. Needless to say, the first violin part is not skimmed, though it is well within the canons of quartet writing until the finale, which is decidedly brilliant.

Kreisler's work is another sort of creation altogether, a tonal autobiographical sketch on the lines of Smetana's "Aus meinem Leben," with a more substantial musical purpose than any other work of his. Much of its melodic flow is attractive, though the harmonic spice tends to dull when served as often as it is here. I wouldn't like to make a direct comparison between this performance led by Sylvan Shulman (with Bernard Robbins as second, Ralph Hersh playing viola, and Alan Shulman, cello) and the RCA one (with Kreisler, Thomas Petrie, William Primrose, and Lauri Kennedy) save to say that if it necessarily lacks the personal impact and drive of Kreisler's style as violinist, it is as thoughtful and evocative as any other rendering could be. Those who know other recordings by this group know what to expect in tonal faithfulness; others will find it hardly subject to improvement.

