

# Toscanini's Brahms

## PRO CARDUS . . .

MY SINCERE THANKS for your inclusion of Neville Cardus's provocative account of the Toscanini recordings of the Brahms symphonies [SR Mar. 27] and a fervent hope that his enlightening views will follow on more things musical. The man, quite evidently, is both a learned musicologist and an observant humanist, to judge from his bramblelike account of the Maestro, focusing the gifted octogenarian in the light of both man and musician.

Mr. Cardus's essay reads like the flow of fresh spring water and his comment that "Toscanini is greater as a formalist than as a poet" is perhaps the most succinct description yet to appear in print concerning the aged I-tal-i-an, another unforgettable gem from Mr. Cardus's copy. The whole thing seems to suggest, and rightly so, that we here in America are too close to the Maestro, sometimes forgetting that "other interpretations" assume just validity in spite of Toscanini's supreme mastery of an orchestral force. To be sure, there are many who "would not live" with anything but a Toscanini reading, be it Berlioz or Brahms, yet basic rationality forces us to gaze beyond such a standpoint. I can respect Munch doing the Brahms Fourth or Monteux doing the Beethoven Fourth, viewpoints that have aroused no small amount of antagonism from many quarters and which compel me to believe that, thank the gods, twenty-three is no age to be considered a purist.

More then, please, from Mr. Cardus, be it on Toscanini, Stokowski, or Ormandy and a few of the Continentals as well. His uncanny conveyance of a language (and subject) that too often falls into the rapidly occurring clichés and "smartness" of contemporary writing is welcome.

JAMES J. GRADY, JR.

Philadelphia, Pa.

## . . . AND ANTI

THE EVALUATION of the Toscanini recordings of the four Brahms symphonies by the SR was something I had anticipated with some eagerness, remembering the masterful Beethoven essay last year by Ernest Newman. Neville Cardus's companion piece to that is decidedly unworthy of its partner . . .

It is not only that Mr. Cardus is one of those give-and-take critics, seemingly unable to let a "yea be yea," but also that he is an irrelevant and impertinent one. After all, what do Brahms, Toscanini, or I and the other record buyers care about Mr. Cardus's "feelings"? Brahmsian unction, Ixion wheels, vintners, connoisseurs, amateurs and professionals, not to mention Sir William Gilbert, "have nothing to do with the case." One has only to read the subjective nonsense which is offered as an interpretation of the first movement of the C minor Symphony to

know that Mr. Cardus is more impressed by his own opinion of the music than by the music itself. Criticism is necessarily subjective, but it is inexcusable when it is this and nothing more.

The review is, of course, unfavorable. Several faint praises are sounded, but no amount of bandying about phrases like "integrity . . . power . . . purposeful rhythm . . ." can efface the impression of supercilious scorn for the man whose Brahms at its best "rings truer to Tosca-


nini than to the music." When that is said, one has said the worst.

Mr. Cardus has something to say about the absence of nightingales in Toscanini's Brahms. After reading his review I am more concerned that the SR has introduced a "cuckoo in the nest." . . .


WILLIAM RALSTON, JR.

New York, N. Y.

EDITOR'S NOTE: There are two sides to every question, even including Toscanini's Brahms. As the first letter indicates, the Cardus view expresses an opinion held by more than a casual number of music lovers. And the second speaks for those who find it heretical.



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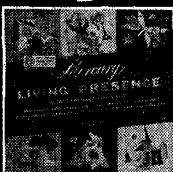
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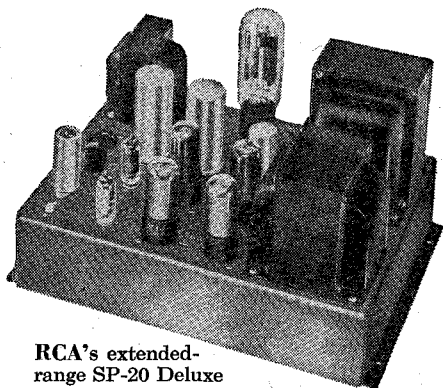


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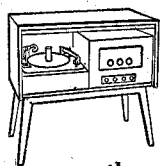


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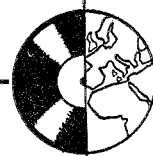
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# THE OTHER SIDE

(IMPORTED RECORDINGS)



LONDON.

**T**HIS month Sir Thomas Beecham celebrates his seventy-fifth birthday and, to mark the occasion, Philips have placed in various suitable journals an advertisement showing a somewhat surprised and incredulous looking Sir Thomas, together with the announcement that "by arrangement with Columbia Records Inc. of New York we shall shortly be issuing recordings of Sir Thomas conducting the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, on the world famous Philips Minigroove 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  Long Playing Records." Since the crucial word in this announcement is "shortly," a somewhat relative term, we are little wiser than before, but we may take it that something will emerge before the onset of autumn. Rumor has it that among Sir Thomas's latest ventures for Philips-Columbia is a new version of Handel's "Messiah." If true, it would be the third time that he has recorded it. Provided he has a better team of soloists than on the last occasion as well as really first-class recording, it could well prove to be the complete answer to our present dilemma.

For April has brought us no fewer than three new recordings of "Messiah," and—as so often—the reviewer wishes that it were possible to take what is best from each and to blend such assets into a single, truly commendable version.

As things are, the intending purchaser first of all has to decide what kind of "Messiah" he wants. If he is a devotee of the massive Victorian tradition of oratorio performances, then he will undoubtedly plump for the new Columbia set directed by Sir Malcolm Sargent. Here, on three discs, we have the kind of "Messiah" that can be heard at the Royal Albert Hall any Christmas or Eastertime, with some small cuts, Mozart's additional orchestration, a full orchestra, and a fine, big choir. As in the case of Sir Malcolm's earlier recording, he conducts the Huddersfield Choral Society and the Liverpool Philharmonic, but of the soloists only the bass, Norman Walker, has repeated his earlier performance (he shows distinct signs of age, moreover). The soprano and tenor, Elsie Morison and Richard Lewis, are much better than their predecessors; alto Marjorie Thomas sings well, thought not as expressively as did Gladys Ripley. The two other versions both at-

tempt to present an "authentic" performance of the complete score, though neither goes as far as some recent performances we have heard in London in which the arias were embellished with ornaments such as were common usage in Handel's own day. Decca gives us the work in its entirety, using the edition prepared by Julian Herbage "from the original manuscript." Handel's original orchestration is used, including a harpsichord continuo (conspicuous by its absence on Columbia), and Sir Adrian Boult conducts moderate-sized sections of the London Philharmonic Choir and Orchestra. The performance as a whole is smooth and competent, if rather lacking in fervor. The two female soloists, Jennifer Vyvyan and Norma Procter, are very satisfactory, the two men, George Maran and Owen Brannigan, just about adequate. As usual, Decca has refused to sacrifice quality of sound on the "value-for-money" altar and has spread "Messiah" over eight sides. The resultant recording is well-nigh perfect, crystal clear and exquisitely smooth.

The Nixa-Westminster "Messiah," which is directed by Scherchen and which claims to be no less than a "re-creation of the original Dublin performance of 1742," has already reached the United States (see page 49). It is, without doubt, the most interesting and controversial of the three rival versions; Scherchen's dramatic treatment and his many unusual tempi (here and there bordering on the eccentric) ought to stir up quite a debate among our traditionalists. I should have preferred slightly larger forces for the more massive choruses ("Hallelujah," for example, sounds rather undernourished) and the basically superb recording is somewhat marred by "overcrowding" (resulting in pre-echo and end-of-side distortion), but on the whole this is an absorbing experience.

**O**NE of Decca's most ambitious projects to date has been the integral recording of Vaughan Williams's symphonies. The performances by the London Philharmonic conducted by Sir Adrian Boult took place under the personal supervision of the octogenarian composer and at the end of the Sixth Symphony—probably his masterpiece—we find a short impromptu speech by V.W. thanking