



SPOTLIGHT ON THE MODERNS

"Les Six" up to Date

THE FRENCH composers known as the "Six," who were honored about a year ago with a Parisian concert that is happily preserved on discs (Angel 35117-8), have enjoyed the advantages of typical twentieth-century promotion—the promotion every businessman knows to be essential to proffering new wares. But there have been disadvantages, too. Oversimplified slogans and misrepresentation in advertising are small cause for qualms once a commercial product is launched. They never cease, however, to visit themselves upon the artist, since he is constantly being reevaluated. This is why Darius Milhaud was obliged time and again, like the author repudiating a publisher's blurb on the jacket of his book, to defend "serious music" against the claims of his group's literary protagonist, Jean Cocteau, who vaunted music of the circus and dance hall.

Milhaud's admonishments have not kept us from persisting for over three decades in a view of the "Six" as a gang of pranksters. The sleeve of an Angel LP (35133) containing Francis Poulenc's sextet tells us this member of the provocative French coterie is convinced music "never must be really serious." And Milhaud himself contributed much to the myth in works like "Boeuf sur le Toit" and "Création du Monde," which not only distill nightclub essences, but underline in their acid harmony the very impudence of bringing such matter into the shrines of "long-hair" art.

How utterly confounding it will be to those who turn for amusement to the album devoted to the "Six" and encounter instead, after an over-bubbling overture by Germaine Tailleferre (scarcely its most representative member), no trace of frivolity, but only the most noble, tender, and impassioned sentiments. The solemnity of the Prelude, Fugue, and Postlude from Arthur Honneger's ballet of 1931, "Amphyon," will be least surprising, since he long ago established a reputation for a monumental style which, if it seemed contrary to the group's aims, was explained away by Swiss origins that set him apart. In his autobiography Milhaud complained that critics "treated me as a legpuller and joker incapable of serious thought, but they regarded Arthur as both serious and profound"—and this notwithstanding Milhaud's occupation from 1913 to 1922 with setting the Aeschylus trilogy, "Oresteia,"

or his devotion to the hallowed pattern of the string quartet, in which medium he has by now written eighteen admirable works, the twelfth of which is available in a ravishing performance by the Quartetto Italiano, coupled on another new Angel LP with Debussy's quartet (LP-35130).

We are more accustomed now to Milhaud's substantial side and better prepared to receive him as composer of the full-fledged symphony of 1944 (his second) in this album. But how to reconcile the black funereal mood of the third movement with his youthful attack on Franck for "*le sérieux à tout prix*" and on Wagner? This should not be so hard to do if we bear in mind that Milhaud and his confederates did not disdain nineteenth-century Romanticism itself, but the empty, pompous mimicry of its most exaggerated attitudes. They realized all too well that its influence was strong, a threat to individuality. Drastic measures were needed to clear the air for them to start all over and develop an expressivity that was their own and at the same time distinctly French. Once the air had been cleared the most wanton products had served their purpose. Idle pose had been routed, and the works that simply thumbed their nose could be scrapped. A few years ago in Milhaud's presence I strummed a shimmy he wrote in 1920, whereupon he told me, "you remember things I'd very much like to forget." The words renewed their significance when I heard Cocteau's recorded speech, which goes with the album, for he mentioned only lyricism and nationalism as aims shared by the group, and said nothing of the old predilection for the circus and music hall.

When Milhaud inveighed against "the serious at all cost" he meant there is room in a five-movement symphony such as his, despite its deeply reflective slow part, for an easygoing, pastoral opening and a return to the pastoral mood (more luminous now) precisely where we need it as relief, after the third movement.

The album's finest work is Poulenc's "Sécheresses" (Droughts) of 1937 for chorus and orchestra. If the poems were inexcusably omitted from the brochure, their titles at least indicate the desolateness of the subject matter. We know from such remarkably sustained songs as "Sanglots" how eloquently Poulenc can handle tender

words. Given more imposing forces, he has achieved a work of depth and power that is very moving.

THE most disappointing music is Georges Auric's suite from his ballet "Phedre" of 1950. Even the cantata of the group's long silent member, Louis Durey, surpasses it. Auric draws liberally on the hackneyed formulae that would seem to be stored in a public card-catalogue to which anyone (especially a Hollywood composer) may refer who wants to come up quickly with regulation music for stock situations. I had a similar impression from two other newly recorded ballet scores, Antheil's "Capital of the World" and Banfield's "Combat" (Capitol LP-8278). I find it hard to keep all three works apart in retrospect, despite marked differences of plot.

When I recall Auric's witty music for René Clair's "A Nous la Liberté" I can only conclude that the grand manner is not for him. Yet his choice of "Phedre" for the 1953 concert of the "Six" is an admission that if lighter works, reflecting Cocteau's original ideal, are agreeable from time to time, a composer on important occasions wants to be represented by serious music. Indeed, a little of the French divertimento style goes a long way. Listening to Poulenc's charming sextet, even in the superb Angel recording by the woodwind quintet of Radiodiffusion Française, with Jean Françaix at the piano, I find myself after a while looking for something to do, content to have the music provide an agreeable background. This also holds for Françaix's wind quintet on the reverse side, with all its virtuosity in the handling of the medium.

Though not a member of the "Six," he pursues their aims more consistently than they themselves do, and his quintet is like a joke that goes on too long. His String Trio in C, lasting only half an LP side, is easier to take (Westminster LP-5316). Lennox Berkeley, whose trio fills out the side, is an English member of the same French charm school who succeeds, however, in spicing his harmonies to advantage. In this sense he seems closer to Milhaud than to Françaix. But Milhaud's harmonic density is quite special and gives the personal stamp to his music. Yet he is just as capable of relinquishing it now and then, while still preserving his individuality, as in the mild "Cheminée du Roi René" (1940), another work superbly recorded by the French radio wind group (Angel LP-35079). Pleasant as it is, I must admit it is overshadowed by the vitality of Hindemith's "Kleine Kammermusik" on the reverse side. —ARTHUR BERGER.

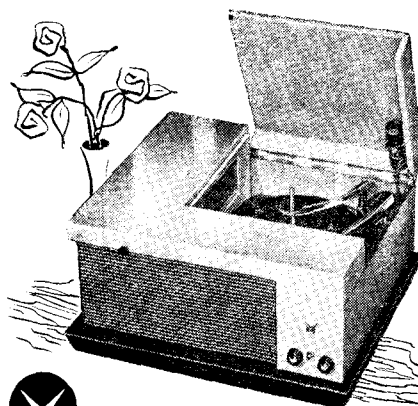
Donizetti's Elixir

WHAT would you most like to hear if you could hear any musical performances of the past? I should like to listen to Queen Victoria, then the Princess Victoria, singing the duet beginning "Voglio dire . . . lo stupendo" and singing the part of Nemorino to the Dulcamara of Luigi Lablache, the great Neapolitan bass—all this of course, in Donizetti's "L'Elisir d'amore." Nor did the young princess, who studied singing with Lablache for nearly a year and a half, confine herself to duets. She announces in her diary that she highly enjoyed, in what proved to be one of her last lessons, singing not once but twice the "pretty little aria," by which she refers to "Una furtiva lagrima." Like so many other operas our grandparents enjoyed, "L'Elisir d'amore" has also done very well for itself since operas began filling microgrooves. Done several years ago, and nicely enough, thank you, on Cetra, it appears now on Victor's LM-6024, in really resplendent form. In sound it has an edge over the older set, and in Margherita Carosio it has an Adina of great and polished charm. Her voice is one I have long admired, and its absence from our opera houses is one of a list of absences that have kept our Italian coloratura wing from showing off Italianate style and resonance for more than a few years past.

As anyone fortunate enough to know Carosio's "Addio del passato" knows, she is no thin-voiced soprano giving her all on notes two leger lines or more over the staff. She is a lyric artist of distinction and her Adina abounds in proofs of an art not unreminiscent of Toti dal Monte. Opposite Cetra's Cesare Valletti, the new set places Nicola Monti. And Monti can sustain the competition handsomely. I should say that he is only slightly less poised in the subtlest vocalism. For Belcore, Tito Gobbi, who can be rough in his singing when he wants to, is appropriately burly and superb. And, in Donizetti's equivalent of Rossini's "Dottore della mia sorte," comes the skilful and thoroughly apposite singing of Melchiorre Luise, known from his Met days. His "Dottore enciclopedia," early in that great aria, "Udite, udite, o rustici," is a masterpiece. Gabriele Santini conducts the Royal Rome Opera Chorus and Orchestra in the niceties Donizetti gave both forces. In view of Victor's putting the opera on two discs, where Cetra took three, with handsome notes and full bilingual text, this ranks as tops among "Elisirs" on record, and as one of the most enjoyable operatic sets to be bought today.

—PAUL HUME.

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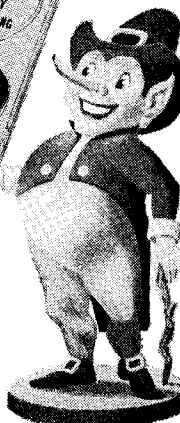
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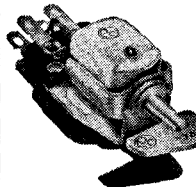
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