

All Boris, No Bores

By FRED GRUNFELD

IN FORMER days a record clerk's face would light up with recognition if you asked for the Alexander Kipnis "Boris" album; Victor M-1000 was a number even the most absentminded salesman could recall. It was a memorable issue in other respects too, but after LPs pushed 78s off the shelves it seemed very unlikely that the set would ever reappear in microgrooves. For one thing Victor had committed itself to a pair of substantial new Godunov's: Boris Christoff, who has easily attained the highest power among current interpreters of the Czar, heading a splendid full-length production made in Paris under Issay Dobrowen; and Nicola Rossi-Lemeni, the strong man in a set of excerpts conducted by Stokowski and designed mainly for lush sound. In addition, the "Treasury" series offered a collection of historic Chaliapin discs. (Columbia's Pinza LP, in Italian, is a pleasant souvenir of old Met evenings but can't be called serious competition.)

It was hardly to be expected—in fact company officials often denied—that a fourth "Boris" would be added where such a plenty already existed. Among the initiate, lingering hopes for a Kipnis revival had been finally shattered when the Stokowski version was issued with the same cover picture that had once adorned M-1000, a portrait of Kipnis in the accoutrements of coronation. Undecided whether to be amused or dismayed, many rushed out to buy any copies of the old album they could lay their hands on.

The effort was vain and premature. This month Kipnis sings out again as Boris on the low-priced Bluebird label, a bargain if I ever heard one. Reproduction has been decidedly improved during the transfer; the flexible strength of his singing is more impressive than ever. Everything is present and accounted for: the Prologue, Coronation Scene, Varlaam's Song, Act II Monologue, the Shuisky Duologue and Clock Scene, and Boris's Farewell and Death. All Kipnis has lost is his picture. (The new cover sports an old engraving.) Thus the present Boris situation on LP presents a rosy aspect indeed. Never has one role been served so well by so many.



Alexander Kipnis as the great Tsar.

Not long ago, when the Met had three basses alternating in the title role, Irving Kolodin tells me he suggested that the management might do well to use each in a different act. (A special kind of good enough gala, of course.) The complete Moussorgskyite, employing a similar technique, can put together from records an all-time composite "Boris" such as dreams are made on. Chaliapin, at twenty-five the first to sing the name part in the Rimsky-Korsakov arrangement that put the opera back into circulation, remains its most awesome interpreter on records, though they were made when, by his own admission, he was well past his vocal prime. His work is a study in black and white. Even in these antiquated discs his terror takes on truly supernatural dimensions; in the agony of his guilt he draws no line between song, speech, and sigh. This is as the composer would have it, and Chaliapin is my clear choice for the Death and the Hallucination.

Kipnis, in fidelity still quite acceptable by today's standards, builds the Czar's character in warmer tones and with an unerring sense of phrase

and timing. He excels in that Boris who arouses our sympathies, father Godunov the family man—we'll need him for prayers, paternal blessings, and a nursery interlude. Christoff, spaciouly reproduced and in the full flower of his vocal manhood, is the ideal *boyar* about to be crowned, a Boris still vigorous and self-contained though already filled with foreboding.

Such are their finest moments, but this is not to say that any of the three is less than convincing at other times. Christoff, in addition, doubles in two other major bass roles—not always with the best results, since we reasonably expect considerable contrast in timbre between Pimen, with the pious wisdom of a Father Zossima, and Varlaam, the comic minister-at-large with tattered portfolio. Christoff does use his voice as a striking instrument of theatre, but even he cannot establish a real distinction between Boris and Pimen as they come face to face (and where their music overlaps).

OF COURSE the crowd, not the Emperor, is the real protagonist of the drama, a fact one can more readily appreciate in another "Boris" on LP. The Bolshoi Theatre production recorded in Moscow and released here by both Period and Colosseum suffers from general unsteadiness among the leading singers, but the chorus is quite another matter. These might be some of the selfsame "characteristic peasant women and typical peasant men" whom Moussorgsky watched and overheard, while "Boris" began taking shape, in hopes that "they may all come in handy." The Bolshoi choristers sound no less spontaneous than some I've heard in documentary recordings of Russian folk singers; they learned the rhythms in the cradle.

In the Kromy Forest Scene, they whistle, shout, stage a revolution. Their Parisian counterparts enunciate very clearly. Poor as it is technically, the Soviet recording has another point in its favor. The Simpleton's role is taken by the Bolshoi's leading tenor, Kosslovsky, who proves in wailing, haunting tones how well Moussorgsky succeeded in his aim to let music express "the sounds of human speech in its finest shades as the external manifestation of thought and feeling." Such support can't be found in other issues, and the conclusion is inescapable: on records at least, a good Boris is easier to come by than a good chorus. Here, however, are prime pickings for the discophile who will not settle for less than perfection, and may well achieve it synthetically.

Melba and I

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gallery, or some vaulted hall, you are not liable to be confronted by the sight of a monstrous trumpet, sitting on a table and emitting, after initial rasp and buzz, the loud nasal travesty of Melba's heavenly voice. It is true, however, that there are few singers or performers of any great eminence who have not sung or played into the gramophone, and in doing so have not committed the sin of blasphemy, but I think that no one has done so much to make that deadly instrument popular as Melba has done, and therefore she is the greatest sinner.

I have been fortunate enough, lately, to be able to listen to a great collection of Melba records belonging to a good friend. Played with the equipment of today, there is undoubtedly a lot more fidelity in those old recordings than was suspected years ago, and they at least give to the present generation some idea of what the Melba voice sounded like. I have chosen a few, in chronological order of recording, which I think are good examples of the great art that was Melba's:

- "Se saran Rose" (1904): Shows off the wonderful coloratura.
- "Jewel Song": "Faust" (1905): A good example of the perfection of her scale, always likened to a string of pearls, the brilliance of her roulads, and the famous trill.
- "Aubade": "Roi D'Ys" (1906): This is the tenor aria in the opera, but Melba sings it with great *elan* and a different ending, probably arranged for her by the composer.
- "Mi chiamano Mimi" (1906): A very good recording of the true Melba quality, with the luscious tone.
- "Voi che sapete" (1907): Here is the perfect Mozart style, the clean attack, the smooth legato, the shaping of phrases, all so natural and easy to her.
- "Salce, Ave Maria": "Otello" (1910): These are also good records of the Melba voice in one of her favorite roles. I could not help comparing these with the ones made at the farewell.
- "Vissi d'arte": "Tosca" (1910): Shows well her dramatic quality as well as that glorious legato.
- "Depuis le jour": "Louise" (1913): I particularly liked an unpublished one which shows so well the perfection of her voice control and production.
- "John Anderson, my Jo" (1913): This simple little song is a good example

of her enunciation and projection of words.

Melba made a great number of records, recording certain items over and over again. One must remember of course, that recording was in its infancy and that the quality of the sound reproduction varies through the years, no doubt due to experimentation. There are also some startling blemishes, giving the impression that Melba "hooted," a thing I can assure everyone she was never guilty of doing, any more than the variance of pitch—these must be due to technical difficulties of the time. No, the great singer who was called "Madame Stradivarius" by Jules Massenet could never have committed such atrocities.

MELBA was a lyric soprano, but her technique was such that she sang all the famous coloratura roles as well, and the voice had a certain fullness, so that she ventured into other fields, not usually associated with the lyric, *per se*. She sang Aida at Covent Garden, numerous performances of Elsa in "Lohengrin" throughout the world, including the exciting days of the Imperial Opera in St. Petersburg. I remember the story of how she learned the role of Elisabeth in "Tannhäuser" in three days. One morning at breakfast she read an announcement in the *New York Herald* that she was to sing Elisabeth the following Friday, but instead of calling the Opera House and refusing, as she did not know the role, she sent for a repetiteur and learned it. Incidentally, the point of the story was by way of advice to young singers—what you learn quickly you easily forget. While she got through the first performance very well, at a repetition three days later in Philadelphia she had a dreadful time remembering it all. Melba also had a burning desire to sing Brünnhilde in "Siegfried," and in spite of all Marchesi's warnings not to do it she went ahead and sang it at the Metropolitan—once. That, she used to say, was her worst mistake.

Melba's career began in Brussels in 1887, after a year of intensive study with Madame Marchesi in Paris, and ended in London in 1926, at the age of sixty-seven. It was simply amazing how little toll the years had taken of that glorious voice, so much of the old beauty and steadiness of tone was still there. The proof of all this is in the unpublished recordings actually taken during the performance. Very few will be fortunate enough to be able to hear these records, I know, but the same qualities are in the two duets we recorded together, and which were published, along with the two songs done at the same time, "Clair de Lune" and "Swing low, Sweet Chariot."

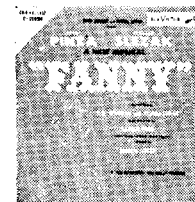
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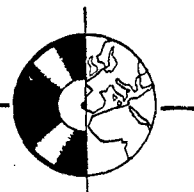
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THE OTHER SIDE



TOURING YEOMEN OF THE USSR

LONDON.

NOTWITHSTANDING the European Defense Pact, these islands have during the past few weeks been subjected to a veritable invasion by groups of athletes, footballers, dancers, and musicians from the Soviet Union. This is the third successive winter that Russian musicians have visited Britain, but the latest of these "cultural delegations" has been especially notable since it included, in addition to some splendid dancers, fine singers, and a leading string quartet, such outstanding figures as composer Aram Khachaturian and violinist David Oistrakh. Indeed, seldom can London have had so much to offer to students of the violin as this November: it was possible within the space of little more than a week to hear and see in action Stern, Heifetz, Szigeti, and Menuhin, as well as Oistrakh.

We have been able to study the great Russian virtuoso in recital and in the concertos of Brahms and Khachaturian (at the time of writing a further concert, which will include the Beethoven and Tchaikovsky concertos, is still to come). In the latter work the Philharmonia Orchestra was conducted by Khachaturian and, quite apart from the interest attached to so authentic a performance, this was among the most dazzling exhibitions of fiddling it has been my lot to overhear.

Simultaneously with Oistrakh's public appearances, several recordings by him have at last reached the British market, the first to be issued here for over a decade except for Supraphon's Glazunov Concerto. The Brahms Concerto and Bach's F minor sonata, coupled with the Schubert Duo, will already be familiar to many readers since our Monarch discs are presumably descended from the same Russian tapes as the Vanguard and Period records of these works: the recordings are somewhat primitive and, in the Brahms, the orchestral playing leaves a good deal to be desired. Fortunately the Beethoven Concerto, which Oistrakh recorded for English Columbia (Angel), not only shows us the violinist at his magisterial best but also receiving admirable support from the Stockholm Festival Orchestra under Sixten Ehrling—a beautiful recording. (If the Sibelius Concerto, said to have been put on tape at the same time, is of comparable excellence, it should certainly

be worth a very appreciative hearing!)

Records from Decca's November list are still arriving and these include a number of works by the great Danish composer, Carl Nielsen, whose music is beginning to enjoy considerable favour in this country. The orchestral works—Fifth Symphony, "Maskerade" Overture, Flute and Clarinet Concertos—are all conducted by Thomas Jensen; Mogens Wöldike directs three Motets for unaccompanied choir and a composition for organ, entitled "Commotio," is played by Georg Fjelrad. The admirable Vienna Octet, which made its bow some years ago with an SP set of Schubert's Octet, now repeats its suave and enjoyable performance for LP, two of Haydn's greatest symphonies—the "Military" and No. 102 in B flat—are played in brisk and workmanlike fashion by the London Philharmonic under Solti and, despite some ragged patches, Handelians will enjoy a lively account of the complete "Water Music" by the Boyd Neel Orchestra, conducted by its founder (who is rarely heard in Britain these days since he spends most of his time in Canada).

TO ROUND off an uncommonly adventurous consignment, we have a concert of early vocal music and a disc of contemporary English chamber music. The former contains some thirteenth to sixteenth century "Laudi," two Responsories by Victoria and works by Palestrina; it introduces for the first time a remarkably fine Italian group, the Quartetto Polifonico, consisting of two tenors, a baritone, and a bass. The other record features Frederick Grinke, one of our most accomplished violinists, who has done yeoman service in the cause of present-day music. He plays Edmund Rubbra's Sonata No. 2 for Violin and Piano and the Sonatina for Violin and Piano by Lennox Berkeley, assisted by the composers, as well as Berkeley's "Theme and Variations for Solo Violin"—an interesting coupling which contrasts two composers of utterly divergent personalities.

Decca's production figures of the past few months must be truly astonishing for, judging from the number of records I have received for review, its factories appear to be turning out more LPs than those of all the other companies added together.

—THOMAS HEINITZ.