

# Bach's Orchestral Suites

By PAUL HENRY LANG

BACH: *Four Suites for Orchestra*. Felix Prohaska and the Vienna State Opera Orchestra. (Vanguard BG-530-31, \$11.90.) *The same*. The Hewitt Orchestra. (Haydn Society HSL-91, \$11.90.) *The same*. Fritz Reiner and the RCA Orchestra. RCA Victor LM-6012, \$11.44.)

**S**TUDENTS of "old music" have long been familiar with the problem of "rhythmic alteration" which refers to the changes the score was subjected to in actual performance. According to this doctrine, the length of time that each note must be held varied in performance and differed from the graphic image of the score. This was especially true in slow movements, where, according to C.P.E. Bach, "the sixteenth notes in an adagio sound insipid if dots are not placed between them." This means, of course, that a perfectly innocent looking passage that is rattled off by our present-day musicians actually sounded quite different in Bach's own time.

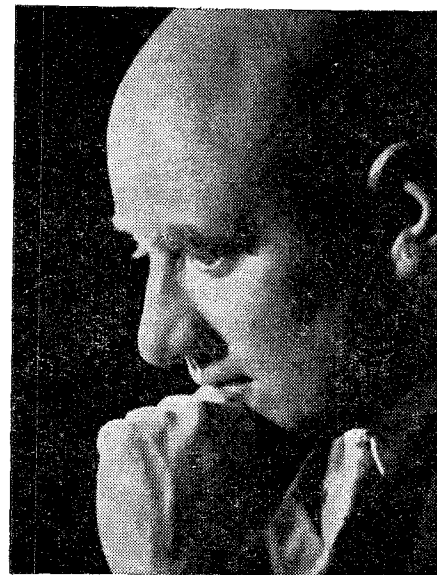
Certain "good" notes (i.e., those on the strong beat) received accents and a little lengthening, while "bad" or "passing" notes (i.e. transient notes on the weak beat) were speeded up or slurred. If we recall that Baroque music was the rhetoric of the age transplanted into sound, it is quite easy to see that this rhythmic alteration aimed at more expressive delivery, something that is missing in the uniformly massive modern rendering of Baroque music (excepting, of course, by a few able and literate musicians) or, if present, takes the form of romantic exuberance technically known as *schmalz*. Agreement on and understanding of the expressive qualities of music brought about by rhythmic alteration were so universal throughout the Baroque era that few of the theoretical writers found it necessary to say much about the subject.

Now Vanguard, which most commendably operates under a "music director," has decided that the time has come to enlighten the American public about the falsity of our performances of Baroque music and has proposed to present an "example of musicology in action." It has issued Bach's four orchestral suites with the

slow movements of two of them played according to the doctrine of rhythmic alteration. This could have become not only the sensation of the year in recording but a milestone of music-making. Unfortunately, while the intentions were most laudable, the execution did not realize them. Such a momentous departure from conventional performance practice calls for scholarship and musicianship of a type that is seldom exhibited on the part of conductors and players at work today, and I regret to say that Prohaska, although a very capable musician, is no exception.

The protagonists of this noble experiment did not go far enough in their studies. They do not seem to know that the rules they quote were not of universal validity, but rather flexible, and that they changed to a certain extent with each succeeding generation during the long reign of the Baroque. They disregard the fact that rhythmic alteration was mainly applied to diatonic (stepwise) progressions only. Where the comments accompanying the recording speak of a note "held much longer," the eighteenth-century theorist says "some-what longer," and where the annotation says "played unequally," Quantz expressly says "a little unevenly." The net result of the experiment (restricted to two slow movements, the conventional version being given at the end of Suites 3 and 4) is a nervous, jerky texture accentuated by rigid application of the doctrine of alteration, thus merely leading to a new convention. The fact that trills and other ornaments are often inaccurately played, that the keyboard continuo is perfunctory, that there is little differentiation in the sound pattern, and that the annotations are poor, testifies to the absence of the degree of scholarship needed for the success of such an undertaking. If Vanguard wants further to explore this field—and it is very much hoped that it will—I recommend that an able scholar-musicians such as Arthur Mendel, Putnam Aldrich, or Sol Babitz be consulted. So much for the experiment.

When we look at the recordings as just discs without musicological overtones we find much in all three sets that is a pleasure to hear. Of the four Suites, the first two are chamber music while the remaining two, call-



Prohaska—"the intentions were laudable."

ing on trumpets and kettle drums in addition to the strings, oboes, and bassoon, are outdoor music, and therefore demand a different treatment. Vanguard and RCA Victor do better with the chamber music while Haydn carries off the palm with its rendition of the resplendent outdoor pieces. The vigor and incisiveness of the Haydn Society recordings which show to great advantage in the trumpet suites appear unsuitable to the more intimate chamber music compositions, and in the Second Suite the breathiness of the solo flutist, who has trouble with his articulation, is a disadvantage. The Vanguard recording of this celebrated piece is much better and its flutist is an accomplished artist. Were it not for a certain stodginess in the inner movements this would have been a really fine performance.

However, even Prohaska and Vanguard cannot compare to Reiner and RCA in the First Suite. Here is a master conductor leading a superb orchestra with which he can do anything he pleases. The tone is that of chamber music, the tempos are excellent, and the phrasing good. We have that rarity, a conductor who knows how to handle two instruments operating in the same register: the second oboe relieves the first one at the right moment, consequently the part writing becomes crystal clear. At the same time, Reiner likes to use legatos where there should not be any, and he is the only one of the three conductors who makes those outlandish ritards that our forefathers considered the hallmark of ancient music. Just the same, the others cannot touch his orchestra when it plays the quiet dances non-legato, with a feathery elegance; even those behemoths of the orchestra, the

bass fiddles, tiptoe gracefully in ballet slippers no matter how intricate the convolutions of the bass line. On the other hand, Reiner's B minor Suite is a caricature of Baroque music. It is hard to believe that the same man is officiating at the conductor's desk; the piece is ponderous and BIG, with soulful crescendos that blow your hat off and ritards that give you asthma.

**T**HE two magnificent "showpieces," suites 3 and 4, suffer in the Vanguard version from insufficient differentiation in the sound pattern (which, I realize, may be the fault of the engineers) whereas when the trumpets enter in the Haydn Society set the whole scene is bathed in radiance. The lovely chatter of oboes and bassoon—quite ordinary in the Vanguard version—changes the massive sonority of the tuttis and affords a welcome contrast. The concertino parts, nicely handled in the Haydn, are rather nondescript in the Vanguard performance and at times one has the feeling of impending disaster as the bassoon stumbles along precariously. The famous Air—a bit slow with Vanguard and a bit fast with Haydn Society, although it does get off the ground in the Haydn rendition—is still not quite satisfactory even though it is a pleasure to hear it *not* on the G string. Both forget that "air" means "song" and that consequently the melodic line ought to be shaped with a certain freedom.

Reiner startles us anew in the Third Suite by offering an entirely different conception from what we have come to expect in the concert hall. The piece is played as true chamber music, with the trumpets subdued. The slow movements are conceived as tender rather than festive and are beautifully played (except for an overluscious Air), and the fugue is a delight in sprightliness. The trumpets are carefully scaled down to add a little golden timbre to the texture and there is an exquisite balance of sonorities. This is not at all what Bach intended, but it is utterly musical and a joy to hear. But again, at each ending we have to wait for the other shoe to drop, and the gigue is played like the *prestissimo furioso* of some nineteenth-century symphony.

All three conductors are at fault in their use of the kettledrums, and this time one cannot entirely blame the engineers. They do not seem to realize that, besides noisemaking, the timpani act as bass for the three trumpets, a traditional role in those days, and that therefore their pitch must be impeccable and their sound a musical one. The Vanguard timpani appear to be encased in heavy Jaeger

(Continued on page 68)



**Save  
the  
cost  
of  
cabinetry...**

**with NEWCOMB  
CLASSIC 25 AMPLIFIER  
with REMOTE CONTROL**

Your savings in cabinetry with this Newcomb remote control amplifier can equal the cost of the amplifier itself! Yes, Newcomb—the greatest name in true precision-built high fidelity components—offers you the most advanced design, the most outstanding amplifier performance in the Classic 25.

No other amplifier at any price offers you all of these features:

- True remote control in a handsome unit that can save you the cost of expensive cabinet work. You place the amplifier and other components in a closet, desk or bookcase, and control your music system from as far as 100 feet away from the equipment center.
- Exclusive Audi-Balance that gives you permanent low distortion.
- 25 Watt reserve power and less distortion at average volume; self-contained shock-mounted pre-amplifier; automatic microgroove level correction; exclusive Adjusta-Panel mounting; tape recording input and output jacks; U/L-approved.

Here is the amplifier for a world of listening pleasure. Newcomb components are designed by the industry's foremost audio engineers, backed by Newcomb's 17 years of experience in the high fidelity field. See your high fidelity dealer for a demonstration of Newcomb Amplifiers, tuners and other high fidelity equipment, priced from **\$44.75 to \$269.50.**

Write us today for name and address of your nearest Newcomb distributor, and the free booklet, "Modern Classics in Sound."



True High Fidelity Since 1937

**NEWCOMB**

HIGH FIDELITY AMPLIFIERS

The Heart of Your Home Music System



**FREE!**

Send today for "Modern Classics in Sound," handsomely illustrated booklet on high fidelity.

**NEWCOMB AUDIO PRODUCTS CO., Dept. B2,  
6824 Lexington Ave., Hollywood 38, Calif.**

Please send me free booklet, "Modern Classics in Sound," and name of my nearest Newcomb distributor. Also, send me information on:

- ☐ Newcomb School Phonographs  
☐ Newcomb Commercial Sound Systems  
☐ Newcomb Public Address Systems

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ Zone \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_



# Recordings in Review

## Strauss's Sunset Glow

STRAUSS: *Four Last Songs*. Lisa della Casa, with the Vienna Philharmonic directed by Karl Böhm. (London LD 9072, \$2.95.) The same, with the final scene of "Capriccio." Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, with the Philharmonia Orchestra directed by Otto Ackermann. (Angel 35084, \$5.95.)

IT IS something more than thirty years since a word-conscious critic described Richard Strauss as "the false dawn of modern music." Long after the critic had departed, Strauss's day continued, and in its sunset glow he wrote some of his most beautiful music—not only these magnificent songs, now available for all to appraise and, if they are so disposed, to enjoy, but also the sumptuous "Metamorphosen" for strings, which will, one of these days, come into its own as a masterpiece of the symphonic string literature.

Ernest Newman once imagined the "Abschied" of Mahler's "Lied von der Erde" to mark a certain climactic point in Germanic musical romanticism, but the old, supposedly extinct, volcano of Garmisch had the last words, as befits his unique status, post-Wagner. In these sumptuous songs of 1948, when he was eighty-four, there is nothing but mastery—mastery of form, of musical expression, and, above all, mastery of self. He is not merely above but beyond the battle. Striving no longer to astonish or impress or overwhelm the listener, he manages nevertheless to enchant him with the kind of sorcery so well known to us that we had, almost, forgotten to associate it with a living man. The dying one reminds us, in one of those superhuman exhibitions of intellectual power that defy explanation.

The texts, of course, are nostalgic, honoring such paladins of the German lied as Hermann Hesse and Josef von Eichendorff. "Im Abendrot," which with its touching quotation from "Tod und Verklärung" stands last in the sequence, was actually written first. But there is no question that "Beim Schlafengehen," "September," and "Frühling" are properly placed before. It is as though, having satisfied himself that he knew where he was heading, artistically, Strauss could prepare the way more effectively. Orchestrally the detail is as sure as it is pure.

Both performances are worthy of the responsibility involved in launch-

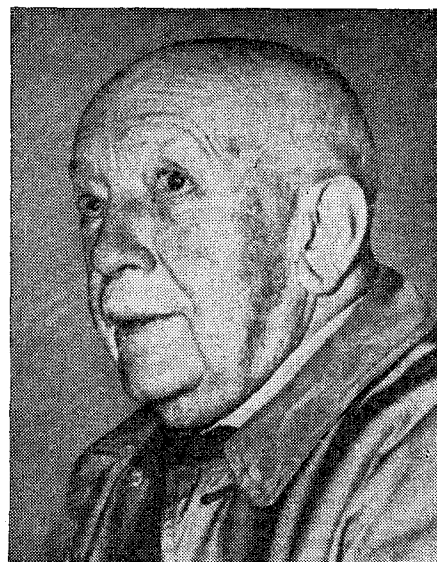
ing these works on LP. (Kirsten Flagstad, who first sang them publicly in 1950 with Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting, recorded them for HMV under the patronage of the Maharajah of Mysore, but the results have never reached us.) In the nature of the artistic personalities involved there are, necessarily, variations of emphasis: Della Casa, with her cool sumptuous purity of line gives us the ultimate in sculptural phraseology; Schwarzkopf, more urgent in her emotional response, underscores word meanings and shadings of expression. Each, clearly enough, is wholly conversant with the material in both its musical and poetic phases. As much may be said for conductors Böhm and Ackermann, in terms of the varying objectives of the recording engineers.

Fortunately, there need be no either/or, since the Schwarzkopf twelve-inch LP provides the abandoned Straussian with a further treat: the last monologue of the Countess in "Capriccio." This is a quasi-philosophic discourse that sums up the preceding hour and a half of music and provides those who have not heard "Capriccio" with an elaborate synthesis of its qualities. Those who want only the "Four Last Songs" will find Della Casa's disc warmly satisfying; those with a curiosity about other aspects of Strauss will find an investment in Schwarzkopf's well repaid. Both are excellent reproductions, with the Della Casa embodying a distant, encompassing pickup, the Schwarzkopf a closer, more detailed one.

## And High Noon

STRAUSS: "Don Quixote." Pierre Fournier, cello, and Ernst Moraweg, viola, with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Clemens Krauss. (London LL 855, \$5.95.) The same. Gregor Piatigorsky, cello, Richard Burgin, violin, and Joseph de Pasquale, viola, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Charles Munch. (RCA Victor LM 1781, \$5.72.)

MORE than fifty years (1897) before Strauss wrote the "Four Last Songs" noted above, he completed what is generally considered the most subtle and enduring of his orchestral works. The conductors who have recorded it—Beecham, Ormandy, Reiner, Strauss himself, in addition to the present pair—may not be quite legion, but they are considerable. All must reckon with the fact that



Strauss at eighty-four—"sorcery."

there is in existence a tape of the Toscanini broadcast of last November which will, sooner or later, be included in the recorded catalogue.

In present terms it seems destined to be late rather than soon, which returns the focus of interest to the two new, and generally excellent, versions enumerated above. Passing reference was made last month to the London issue and what seemed then to be unduly slow tempi. Comparison with the Munch version (and Strauss's own with the Bavarian State Orchestra on Decca DL 9359) testify that these are merely moderately, not unduly, slow tempi.

Other categorical differences which may help the reader reach a choice are as follows: Munch's conducting and the recording of it strive for accent on individual elements, including the solo cello of Piatigorsky, with some relevant fine points not usually heard; Krauss's treatment is more concerned with a total sonority in which the cello and viola are merely leading elements in the orchestral texture. I would say, too, that Krauss, if less interesting at any one given point, sustains the attention more successfully than Munch. *Per se*, the RCA recording is incisive and remarkably defined; the treatment, however, does not suit this work as well as the more general one of London. Fournier, of course, is no such powerful virtuoso as Piatigorsky, but his playing is beautifully suited to the dimensions of Krauss's outline.

Retrospectively, then, I would cite RCA's "Don Quixote" as a powerful specimen of today's reproductive techniques and London's as a more integrated way of hearing the music. If the implication here has something to do with the Toscanini tape, that is an example of subconscious reservation rather hard to deny.