

# THE ENDURING ELSIE HOUSTON



—Wide World.

"She was mistress of her talent."

By DAVIDSON TAYLOR

**I**F YOU knew her, we agree that we can never forget Elsie Houston. If you did not know her, buy this record\* and begin to know her. I commend to you particularly the song about Bahia, so delicious, so sunny, and so innocent.

She sings on this disc with piano, not the best instrument to accompany her unless others were unavailable. Pablo Miguel plays superbly, but he must have wished to be percussion and orchestra for her.

The first time I saw her was during this country's early passionate courtship of Latin America. The Department of State had assembled a group interested in cultural exchange with Latin America, before Nelson Rockefeller became our distinguished coordinator. After our briefings, Mrs. Bliss invited the delegates (or whatever we were) to her house, and the performer chosen to entertain was Elsie Houston, "who is appearing in a New York night club." It was a large party.

Elsie Houston entered this great drawing room like an African queen. Like a priestess, like the reigning

hetaera, in short, like an artist. She carried some small drums and was tugging two huge candlesticks, because she wanted to sing in the dark. I was drawn to her like a moth. I helped her get the waist-high candlesticks into place (nobody else was helping), lit the candles, and sat on the floor enslaved.

She sang a Macumba ritual song, warming her drums over a smaller candle to tighten and tune the membranes, peering out at us over the flame with inquisitive calm to see whether we could possibly understand. And sweating a little.

Beating with her hand on a little drum, she sang of the sacrifice of a chicken, first "O Cayti," in high, rapt nasal invocation, and then, in a guttural, rapid dance rhythm, "Manguaran." The god Xangô was present in Mrs. Bliss's drawing room. You will not find this spirit on any of her records.

In addition to her great skill as a folk singer, Elsie Houston (great grandniece of Sam Houston) was a beloved performer of Brazilian art music, Villa Lobos's for example. Some of his instrumental music is on the other side of this disc.

But Miss Houston is our subject. What was she like? She seemed tall. Her features were rather Mayan: arched nose, proud eyes, black hair,

Or so I remember. Her appearance changed from time to time. She moved beautifully. Her skin was oily and watery, in fact, a bit swarthy.

One night at Dorle Jarmel's apartment, Dorle asked Elsie to sing. Elsie borrowed a man's hat and took a collection. "I sing for money," she said. "No silver, please." Then she turned off the lights, and with a card table substituting for drum created an incantation.

Carmen Miranda was popular at the time. I am vague about the year, but it was toward the end of Elsie Houston's day. She took her own life in 1943, and that is close enough for the purpose of admiration and sorrow. Elsie lunched with me at the Barberry Room. She had constructed a truncated conical hat of artificial fruit which outrivalled Miranda; it was chic. I was conspicuous merely by being with her, but not because of the hat. It was because of her collected force of character and her darting intelligence. She talked of Brazil and told me how an air force officer had drawn a ring with his forefinger on their country's map, saying, "Here is an area larger than France, and no man has yet flown over it."

The capital of Rio is Paris, as the capital of Hollywood is New York. To Paris Elsie Houston went, and there she wrote a book on Brazilian music and loved a Surrealist poet. Then she turned back to her hemisphere, not wholly home.

**O**NE night my wife and I went to the Rainbow Room to see Elsie and Charles Weidman dance the "Frog Song" (which you can hear on this record). Afterwards she came to our table and assailed me because CBS, then my employer, was broadcasting another Brazilian, Olga Coelho. She had nothing against Olga, except that Coelho was not Houston. Elsie regarded herself as *sui generis*.

Elsie Houston, lovely as her voice was, had even greater skill as a diseuse than as a singer. She was too highly seasoned for the popular American taste. Her flavor was like a secret of *la grande cuisine*. She was mistress of her talent. She could manipulate her voice to evoke a witch doctor, in the praise of elegance, in tenderness toward a child, in pride for the rich Brazilian landscape with all its flowering trees.

If ever we come to understand the Americas for what they really are, we shall become aware of our debt to Elsie Houston. Meanwhile, Carmen Miranda and I should take off our hats and say a prayer for Elsie Houston, whenever we hear this record.

\*ELSIE HOUSTON SINGS BRAZILIAN SONGS; also VILLA-LOBOS; "Bachianas Brasileiras No. 1" and Nonetto. (RCA Victor LCT 1143, \$5.72.)

# Recordings in Review

## Light on the "Pictures"

MUSSORGSKY-RAVEL: "*Pictures at an Exhibition*." Ernest Ansermet conducting the *Orchestre de la Suisse Romande*. (London LL 956, \$5.95.) The same. Antal Dorati conducting the *Amsterdam Concertgebouw*. (Epic LC 3015, \$5.95.)

SAVE for the furrowed ground of "Scheherezade," this work has served as the Derby distance for more ambitious sound engineers than virtually any other. It was, of course, one of the first high fidelity "marvels" in the impressive run of Ansermet and the London Philharmonic half a dozen years ago, and the touch of thoroughbred breeding in that version is even more conspicuous here.

Not that Philips's engineers haven't done an expert work in producing, with Dorati, a performance that won honors as a Grand Prix disc last year. However, Ansermet's concept of Mussorgsky plus Ravel will be satisfying listeners with its refinement, sensitivity, and evocative colorations when the bigger and better bass drums of Philips are gathering honors in other areas. His work is of the essence, musical, and—as reproduced here—leaves me asking for no more. Of course, that is subject to review when the Toscanini broadcast of last winter is made available later this year, but the kind of effort involved is hardly comparable.

For his unused time, Ansermet offers a version of "La Valse" which has many virtues, but is not quite so flavorful as a performance or poetic a recording (and there is poetry in those dials, as well as electricity) as his previous one with the Paris Conservatoire personnel. Dorati offers equally ear-filling versions of Rhapsody's "Moldau" and Dvorak's "Rhapsody No. 3," though both have had readings of more style and suavity under other conductors.

## Musique Française avec Paray

DUKAS: "*L'Apprenti Sorcier*"; FAURÉ: "*Pelléas et Mélisande*" music; ROUSSEL: "*Le Festin de l'Araignée*." Paul Paray conducting the *Detroit Symphony Orchestra*. (Mercury MG 50035, \$5.95.)

NOBODY who heard Paul Paray conduct a guest engagement with the Philadelphia Orchestra in New York a few years ago with his right arm done up in a sling as the result

of a fall will forget the point and decisiveness of his delivery of the well-worn "Sorcerer's Apprentice." Allowing for the difference between the Philadelphia and the Detroit ensembles, Paray's two-armed performance is even more impressive than the one-armed one.

This is the kind of "scherzo" after Goethe that one has often imagined but rarely heard: concise, humorous, neither rushed nor dragged. Its tone is the product of the kind of blending which, we are assured, goes into the best champagne—something for body, something else for tang and flavor, a touch of sweetness offset but not nullified by a stronger distillation. In any case, whatever the justice of the analogy, this is a "Sorcerer's Apprentice" that bubbles and froths as few others have in recent years. The analogy extends to the reproduced sound, which is dry enough while respecting the *goût Américain* in matters of fidelity.

Of the other offerings, I am more partial to the lively, distinct, well-marked performance of the Roussel matter, which says much for its creator in Paray's active, well-informed interpretation. It is also the best reproduced of the three works. The Fauré is played with consideration and excellent orchestral discipline, but the tenuous material does not seem to enjoy Paray's complete confidence. Withal, this is an excellent accomplishment for him, and a highly creditable one for the Mercury engineers.

## Dobbs and Gedda

SCHUBERT: "*Die Entzückung an Laura*," other songs. Mattiwilda Dobbs, soprano, with Gerald Moore, piano. (Angel 35094, \$5.95.)

TCHAIKOVSKY: *Lenski's aria from "Eugen Onegin"* and other arias. Nicolai Gedda, with orchestra directed by Alceo Galliera. (Angel 35096, \$5.95.)

IT IS one of the oldest truisms of music that the mechanics of singing can be taught but the art of singing must be learned. Rarely has it been better demonstrated by singers of outstanding vocal endowment than in the current releases of extensive collections by Dobbs and Gedda. Each is capable of all kinds of beautiful sound, but neither has more than a modicum of the insight, power of projection, or command of texts

to make the individual enterprises less than a rash miscalculation.

Miss Dobbs emerges with somewhat more credit, for she never misuses her fine voice, and the sound she produces is always clear and bell-like, even when something else might be preferable. It is rather disappointing to discover that she has little ability, thus far, to differentiate the vocal colors appropriate to German *lieder* or French *mélodies*. Indeed, it is only by straining the ear that one can make out that different languages are involved.

Her list of songs is, for the most part, a discerning one, adding to the Schubert song noted above such others of quality but not too much familiarity as his "La Pastorella," Brahms's "Nachtigallen Schwingen," and Wolf's "Zitronenfalter," also Fauré's "Notre Amour" and Chausson's "La Cigale." The error of Miss Dobbs's present method may be conveyed by the observation that one remembers, along the way, a climaxing note beautifully sung in one or another of them, but no complete conception fully realized. The recording is excellent.

With Gedda the issue involves voice as well as the use of it. He can manage very well such a cantilena as is provided in Tchaikovsky's "Kooda, kooda," from "Onegin" or, by an all-out effort, the curving top phrase in "Spirto gentil," but the control to sing "Cielo e mar" from "La Gioconda" or "Parmi veder le lagrime" from "Rigoletto" in the time-honored manner of the better tenors is not at his disposal. As for such matters as "Pourquoi me réveiller?" from "Werther" or the lament of Federico from Cilea's "L'Arlesiana," a charitable silence may be observed on behalf of the pleasure Gedda gave us in "The Merry Widow" and "The Land of Smiles." Very good reproduction.

## A "Forellen" from Holland

SCHUBERT: *Quintet in A, Opus 114 ("Forellen")*. Amsterdam Piano Quintet. (Epic LC 3046, \$5.95.)

WHAT is it that makes the "Forellen" a quintet? As most music-lovers know, though the recording engineers usually forget, it is the double bass, providing a unique so-

