

New Thoughts on Old Music

By PAUL HENRY LANG

AS the Brahms, Beethoven, or Tchaikovsky symphonies reach the number of ten or twelve recordings apiece, it becomes more and more evident that the recording companies must turn their attention in increasing measure to other kinds of music. This inevitably leads them into areas the stylistic properties of which are unfamiliar to the musicians involved, and insecure and inaccurate performances often result. In its turn the public is puzzled when listening to diametrically opposed performances of music from the same period. Indeed, the revival of "old music" raises many important problems which sometimes appear to be misunderstood by both scholar and performer, as a colloquy on these pages has only recently indicated [LETTERS TO THE RECORDING EDITOR, SR May 15]. Therefore a few words on the subject might not be amiss.

The archeologist and historian are accustomed to the task of reconstructing the past even though at times all they have to go by is a stone axe or a ruined building. The music historian too finds the building, yet even when it is intact—a well-preserved score—he merely finds the "body" of the music which, unlike the concrete material of the stones, is merely a symbol. The history of notation, the graphic fixation of music, is difficult and complicated, for notation has never been, nor can ever be, unequivocal. Once deciphered and presented in our modern script, the music must be reconciled with our present-day "reading" habits. Actually, we must resign ourselves to the fact that all music from the past is fragmentary. It is so not only because of the very considerable changes in notation, changes that call for virtual "translation," or because composers refrained from giving instructions as to the manner of performance, or because this music followed conventions perfectly understood by the contemporaries but largely unknown to us, but because much of this music called for active participation on the part of the performer.

Let us suppose that with the aid of thoroughgoing musicological studies we restore the score, i.e. the "body," of a madrigal or symphony. We still do not know how this body was

clothed, for no matter how conscientious the textual and stylistic research, it cannot fully enlighten us on how this music sounded to its first listeners. The perplexing problems of the real life of old music called into existence a specific branch of musicology called "performance practice"; it is rather recent, and the first significant modern essays devoted to it date from 1931 (Schering, Haas, Arnold). These are problems other historians of the arts can hardly understand, for a picture or a statue, if preserved, is alive both actually and historically. Certain aspects of old music, on the other hand, were born—and died—when the music was performed. A musical culture that entrusted the performer not only with the elaboration of his "part," with the manner of sound production, with the determination of tempo and dynamics, with the improvisation and execution of the ornaments, without specifying all these vital details and without even binding him strictly to the written musical text, can be envisaged only as the result of a well developed and cultivated collective musical taste.

How can musical scholarship supply this collective taste now lost? We do not have a hard and fast code for the performance of old music, but by studying contemporary opinions on the practice of music we may reconstruct some of its living features. Gradually we can glean information about the manner of performance, the nature of ensembles, the method of mixing or juxtaposing timbres, about accents, tempi, structural proportions; in brief, the means of expression whereby the music of bygone centuries entered the life of society and commanded attention. There is an immense amount of information available, much of it as yet unevaluated. This consists not only of the theoretical literature of two millennia, but pictorial representations, belles-lettres (an abundant source of pertinent information), and even legal documents, charters, or account books. One of the most important sources which has a direct bearing on the quality and nature of the sound of old music is to be found in the examination of old instruments.

When all is said and done, we come up against the greatest obstacle in the

revival of old music (and by "old" I mean any music prior to the nineteenth century): the musical instincts of the man of the twentieth century. No art is so perishable as music. Within a generation or two, a style and a way of music making can and do become completely obsolete and even forgotten. Homer and Dante are still living literature, but music only two hundred years old has to be resuscitated, explained, and methods must be found to communicate it to the public. This cannot be done simply by applying painstaking scholarship to the task. Music so restored must be executed in keeping with the historical facts, but in a manner that will be acceptable to our own musical sensibilities; otherwise we are merely indulging in antiquarianism.

NEEDLESS to say, this calls for delicate compromises which in turn require as much artistry as they do scholarship; neither of these alone is sufficient. It is of no use, for example, to have the figured bass executed if the realization is a perfunctory piece of harmony exercise played on a piano; nor should this take the form of an elaborate "composition" by the editor. We know from a number of documents how this bass used to be set out, and the piano cannot replace the harpsichord, for the *sound* of the latter is an essential ingredient of the style. (A superb example of the combination of true historic insight with exemplary musical taste is to be found in the figured bass realizations that Brahms wrote for Handel's vocal duets.) Another instance is the terracelike dynamics of the Baroque which should not be rendered in rigid black and white, without a trace of crescendo and decrescendo, because to our ears this sounds contrived. Similarly, a ceaseless overlay of ornaments in the keyboard music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while perhaps justified historically, is unacceptable to our sense of melodic design; it must be done with moderation and selectivity.

Let me cite a few particular examples. There are a half dozen recordings of Mozart's Requiem Mass. This is choral music of the first water, still very much imbedded in the polyphonic traditions of the Baroque, with the individual parts living a life of their own, yet at the same time resting on that symphonic foundation without a consideration of which no major work of the classic era, vocal or instrumental, can be understood. Admittedly, we have here a most interesting stylistic merger that calls for



thought and study. The various conductors who have recorded it all try to convey their own conception of the work, which is as it should be, but unfortunately none of them can fully unfold his conception because each one takes the notes in the score literally and falls victim to an old custom that had lost its *raison d'être* long, long ago.

Back in the old days when church choirs were small (as a rule smaller than the orchestra that accompanied them) it was customary to assign some extra instruments to bolster the choir's volume of sound. This so-called *colla parte* manner ("with the [vocal] part") was still widely used in lesser churches in Mozart's time, hence the ubiquitous trombone parts in the Requiem. Any competent musician who knows something of the history of this genre can tell, almost at a glance, where the trombones are *obbligato* and where they are merely used for stiffening the choir. Yet in all recordings (and in all performances I have heard over the years) the trombones tootle along unceasingly with the voices. This robs the choir of its characteristic and lovely sound and makes the ensemble fuzzy and ponderous.

Thus, whether we listen to De Sabata's theatrical distortion of the score or to Krips's "spiritualized" softness accentuated by the characterless voices of boy sopranos and altos (the Day of Wrath announced by innocent youngsters!), this great and much admired work is never heard in all its beauty because of the conductors' failure to combine musical common sense with a little historical study.

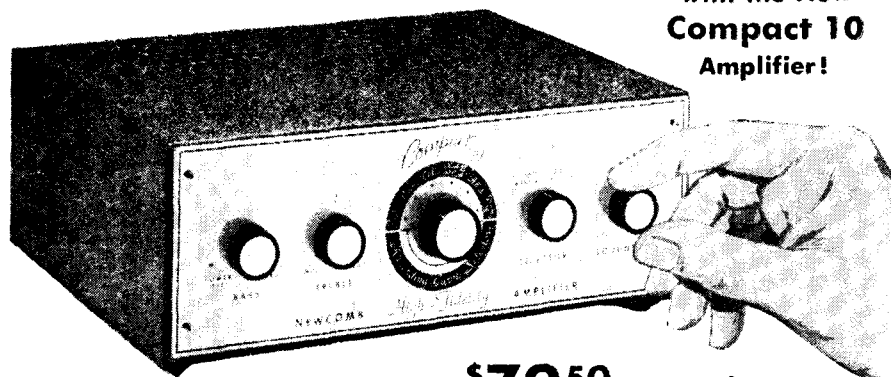
IF the Requiem seems a bit esoteric and out of the way for a modern conductor, let us take a symphony. The so-called "sonata form" is a concept created by the post-classic nineteenth century; the classic composer knew no *form* (i.e. pattern), only a set of principles within which he operated as freely as possible. The classic symphonist builds his sonata not on a "theme" but on a subject, a mere musical *incipit*. The more lapidary and terse this subject the better it is suited for symphonic elaboration. Can there be a more succinct, compressed *incipit* than the four notes that open Beethoven's Fifth Symphony? As a matter of fact, heard by itself such an *incipit* is largely meaningless as compared to the beautiful "big" themes of a romantic symphony; what matters is what happens to this subject. Immediately upon presenting his subject, the classic symphonist plunges into a headlong flight during which the possibilities inherent in the subject are exploited with relentless tenacity and

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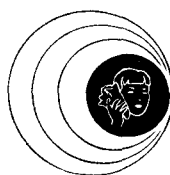
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Recordings in Review

Mendelssohn's "48"

MENDELSSOHN: "*Songs Without Words*," Opus 19, 30, 38, 53, 62, 67, 85, and 102. *Ginette Doyen, piano*. (Westminster WLS 5192, 5246, and 5279, \$5.95 each.)

THIS being, phonographically speaking, the Age of Documentation, it is hardly surprising that Westminster has given Mme. Doyen *cachet* to record all the Mendelssohn "*Songs Without Words*," every blessed one of the forty-eight of them (also some that are not so blessed). Who, other than a student, would want to sit down and listen to nine or ten in a sequence, I cannot begin to imagine. That is, other than a reviewer engaged in evaluating them.

What one discovers soon enough is that when one confronts a well-known one unexpectedly during a sequence, it is more than merely sighting a familiar face in a crowd. It confirms one in the belief that these pieces have been rather thoroughly combed over by twelve decades of virtuosos, the preferable ones among them not neglected. Thus, after listening to eight or nine in order on disc No. 2 and coming upon the G major of Opus 62 (No. 1), it is easy to recognize why it has been singled out for attention under the title of "May Breeze."

Mme. Doyen has much of the finesse and moderation to make a successful Mendelssohn player, the kind of clinging sound that is wanted, and a welcome aversion to effect for effects' sake. The unsigned annotations are suitable as far as they go, but they deprive us of some desirable documentation, including the years in which the eight volumes of six works appeared. Suitable sound, meaning that it is live without being too massive for the material.

The Scope of Von Karajan

DEBUSSY: "*La Mer*." *Herbert von Karajan conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra*; RAVEL: "*Rapsodie Espagnole*." *The same*. (Angel 35081, \$5.95.)

SIBELIUS: *Symphony No. 4*; "*Tapiola*." *As above*. (Angel 35082, \$5.95.)

SOONER or later, Herbert von Karajan will come to America as director of one of our major symphony orchestras, whereupon will follow the general discovery that he is one of

the major *chefs d'orchestre* of the day. If that discovery must wait upon the enterprise and initiative of orchestral managements, there is no reason why the mere phonophile should deny himself the available pleasures in the meantime.

These two discs are among the most remarkable so far offered to us by Angel, whose offerings to date show a more than cursory attention to the talents, among many others, of Von Karajan and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. Among these, Von Karajan's performances have been spectacular rather than consistent, and the ones noted above conform to precedent by being consistently spectacular.

Nothing in Von Karajan's previous catalogue suggests a profound sympathy for Sibelius, but the symphony in question has rarely been better played, or with a larger sense of design or a more assured sense of orchestral contrast. Whether his fundamental sympathy is with the musical

essence or its technical exposition is hard to say, but the totality is dynamic, concise, and powerfully integrated. The same is true of "*Tapiola*." In each the acuteness of sound is well ahead of most things previously accomplished by Angel.

In the works of Debussy and Ravel the question of emphasis is easier to isolate. These are wholly virtuoso expositions of orchestral control, carefully charted to elicit explicit reactions from the listening faculties. They prove beyond doubt that Von Karajan knows what he is up to, even when what he is up to is not quite what Debussy and Ravel sought to convey. Superb sound.

Rossini Redivivus

ROSSINI: "*William Tell*" and "*Semiramide*" *Overtures*. *Arturo Toscanini conducting the NBC Symphony*. (RCA Victor LRM 7054, \$2.99.)

IF THERE is anything that will take the "Hi-Yo" silver out of this music and restore its original golden glow, this is it. "It" is a performance

Debussy on Tape

DEBUSSY: *Quartet in G minor*; HAYDN: *Andante, Allegretto from D minor Quartet* (Opus 76, No. 2). *Fine Arts Quartet*. LISZT: "*Mephisto Waltz*"; RAVEL: "*Alborada del Gracioso*"; GRANADOS: "*Lady and the Nightingale*." *Robert McDowell, piano*. (Webcor Tape 2923-1, \$12.)

NEITHER stout Cortez nor brave Balboa, or both, surveying the Pacific for the first time, could have felt more adventurous than this listener in engaging the mysteries of pre-recorded tape. How difficult or simple is the operation? Well, I managed to unpack the mechanism, instal the tape, and channel it into a regular audio set-up merely by reading the instruction book, and I am limited, otherwise, to the kind of electrical science required for changing a fuse.

What I heard was a practically first-class performance of the Debussy Quartet by the Fine Arts players, gratefully absent of anything like surface sound, but embodying instead a rather noticeable clacking of the spinning reels, with a substantial realism at much lower levels than anything from a disc, and a brilliant fullness in cli-

maxes without any suggestion of overloading. On the other hand, intonation was not 100 per cent dependable, especially when Debussy's writing was sustained and chromatic. This I attribute to some passing *malaise* subject to easy correction. Certainly it is well ahead of the LP process at a similar state of unfamiliarity.

However, if Webcor is to make some lasting impression on the music minded it will have to work out some better scheme in repertory than it now espouses. As projected, the tape is divided into two tracks, setting up considerations akin to the A and B faces of a disc. On this one, it is all string quartet going out, all piano coming back. My guess is that a sounder procedure would be to have the quartet both coming and going, two movements each way. Thus, the customer would be buying Debussy and nothing but Debussy, rather than the miscellany here afforded. As it stands, the total music is well under two LP's, at a dollar more in cost.

McDowell's piano playing is altogether competent, though lacking the personal traits that make for artistic distinction.