

Filigree and Bric-a-brac

ROSSINI: Arias from "Il Barbiere," etc. Fernando de Lucia, tenor. (Classic Editions 7002, \$11.90.)

IN THE Epilogue to "Saint Joan" we are shown The Maid's most fervent well-wishers disbanding in uneasy consternation at the merest hint of her return to earth—and pointing the moral that, though the disembodied legend of Joan may be safely revered, the corporeal person would be far too discommoding and dangerous to have around. Much the same may be said for Fernando de Lucia. As a faint voice to be savored on old phonograph records De Lucia stands with the immortals, but let his like set foot on the Metropolitan's stage tomorrow and he will be greeted at the least with icy disdain and very probably with howls of derision. A tangible De Lucia in 1954 would find us just as nonplussed as Joan's post-mortem idolaters were when faced with her imminent reincarnation. We revere him, but only as an exotic phenomenon capable of doing no present harm.

Our attitude to De Lucia and his ilk may be credited (or blamed, if you will) in large part to a school of thinking epitomized by Arturo Toscanini. Sixty-odd years ago he declared war on those singers who followed their own musical instincts instead of the composer's and who treated an operatic score as if it were no more than a skeletal outline on which to construct their own improvisations. When the smoke of battle cleared Toscanini emerged triumphant, and the victory was so decisive that his championship of the composer *contra* the singer is still observed in almost every quarter.

De Lucia got his start prior to this operatic housecleaning, having made his debut in 1883 while Toscanini was a student, and when he performed for the recording machine during the pre-World-War-I decade he was not inclined to emulate the new musical punctilio being imposed at La Scala. The results (now given LP currency by Classic Editions) were variable in quality but never dull. Of the twenty-nine recordings reproduced here, the first—"Ecco ridente" from "Il Barbiere"—unquestionably affords the most spectacular evidence of De Lucia's unique musical powers. Paradoxically, it affords also the most spectacular evidence of his

musical tamperings. The similarity between his rendition of "Ecco ridente" and Rossini's score is almost coincidental. De Lucia introduces roulades and embellishments all his own and alters the rhythm to suit his individual style of phrasing. But that the Swan of Pesaro would take this ill, I doubt. The music accepts embroidery gracefully, and when it is applied with the amalgam of staccato brilliance and delicacy of inflection that was De Lucia's the effect is irresistible. As much can be said for the other selections from "Il Barbiere" included in Classic's issue as well as for the similarly styled arias from "L'Elisir," "Don Pasquale," etc.

But what shall we make of the gratuitous fiorituras introduced into the arias from "La Bohème" and "Manon Lescaut"? And how are we to judge the opening phrase of "Che gelida manina," which Puccini sets entirely on A flat and which De Lucia (following the accompaniment) sings to the pattern A-flat-B-flat-C? Here he steps beyond the pale. Not because Puccini is more sacrosanct than Rossini and company, but because Puccini's music resists embellishment; what is delicate filigree in one case becomes vulgar bric-a-brac in the other. Yet De Lucia is the kind of musician who cannot be dismissed in terms of black and white. With all its deviations from the text, this "Che gelida manina" leaves the listener in no doubt that Rodolfo is an urbane Parisian poet. De Lucia does not bellow. And his "Pearl Fishers" aria (sung in Italian) likewise reveals a singer whose concern is with imaginatively accentuated phrasing rather than ear-shattering high notes.

The quality of sound is fair to middling, as might be expected of an issue dubbed from shellac discs of hoary vintage. The accompaniments—whether piano or orchestra—are execrable, but the characteristics of the voice come through tolerably well: the dazzling coloratura, the effective crescendi and decrescendi on a single long-held note, and, yes, the all too palpable vibrato. Missing from both record labels and album annotations is any identification of the singers heard in the several duets. Missing also is any indication of dates and places of recording, or indeed of the recording companies involved.

—ROLAND GELATT.

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Recordings in Review

Toscanini as Teacher

BEETHOVEN: "Missa Solemnis." Arturo Toscanini conducting the NBC Symphony Orchestra, the Robert Shaw Chorale, and Lois Marshall, soprano, Nan Merriman, mezzo-soprano, Eugene Conley, tenor, and Jerome Hines, basso. (RCA Victor LM 6013, \$11.44.)

ARTURO TOSCANINI has raised so many monuments to his art in these last few years—the nine symphonies of Beethoven, the four of Brahms, the marvelous "Otello," and the singular "Bohème"—that only a fool would presume to suggest which is the most enduring of them. Being by nature foolhardy, I nominate this present manifestation as the most sizable, the most compelling, and withal the most profound of his recorded accomplishments.

For this, however, I have a number of reasons, none in the least foolish. It is, for one thing, a great, perhaps the greatest, work of a universal master—Beethoven—and one which is ill understood by even experienced music lovers; it is magnificently controlled throughout, labored over and brooded about in a way unusual even for Toscanini; he has poured into it a lifetime of experience which makes us aware that here, at a historic crossroad, was a meeting ground of the great contrapuntal tradition Beethoven inherited from Bach and Handel, and the romantic homophonic impulse he set in motion himself.

The allusion to Toscanini as a teacher is neither careless nor unthinking. I mean, merely, that in penetrating the essence of this complex world of sound—which is as much a separate entity as the Eighth Symphony or the B flat (Opus 130) Quartet—Toscanini has taught us the remarkable fusion of impulses—classical and romantic, contrapuntal and homophonic, sacred and secular—that Beethoven embodied in this vast, challenging, and infinitely rewarding work. There is no excuse, henceforth, for anyone to pretend ignorance or misunderstanding of Beethoven's response to the mystery of life and death. It is all here to be heard, in noble strength and almost overpowering eloquence.

Considering the order of pressures involved, the order of credits to the performers may be arranged this way: to the orchestra, first, for unwavering discipline and virtuosity (I don't like the quality of Daniel

Guilet's violin in the "Benedictus," where it is inescapably prominent); to the chorus for consistent excellence, topped by some stunning execution in the fugal "Credo" almost beyond belief; and to the quartet of soloists, of whom Nan Merriman, mezzo, and Jerome Hines, bass, are the most consistent in sound and musicianship; Lois Marshall the most powerful, and mostly inappropriately so; and Eugene Conley simply out of place, whether singing "Kyrie Eleison" with dry, uninflected sound or mispronouncing "Benedictus." At times the quartet responds to the requirements of Toscanini with even, balanced sound, but the solo surges come closest to being realized in the bass and mezzo registers.

Some of this may be related to the recording, which is fine for the chorus and orchestra, decidedly less good for the vocal quartet. One can readily understand that the two big tonal masses involved should have equal prominence, but that does not justify a kind of indefinite netherland for the quartet, save where it is performing alone and can be artificially boosted. I don't relish decrying any recording which gives back so much of the Toscanini impulse as this one, but I can't believe it represents a maximum application of technical skill to the problem involved.

Among the auxiliary elements are a knowing and instructive commentary by Ernest Newman and a questionable "dramatic" packaging with a "suitable for framing" reproduction of Dürer's "Praying Hands" showing through a cellophane aperture. My feeling is that the ritualistic element is out of place in a work which so far transcends creeds, theologies, and dogmatic implications. Prayer, after all, is in the heart, not in the hands.

Mozart at Twelve

MOZART: "Bastien und Bastienne." Ilse Hollweg, soprano, Waldemar Kmentt, tenor, and Walter Berry, bass, with John Pritchard conducting the Vienna Symphony Orchestra. (Columbia ML 4835, \$5.95.)

FOR most persons "Bastien und Bastienne" is a footnote to the Mozart legend, insured of a durable if obscure place there by reason of the resemblance of a phrase in its overture to the one of which Beethoven made so much in the "Eroica." (This is akin to saying that two stories beginning "Once upon a time" must



Nan Merriman—"consistent musicianship."

necessarily have some relationship.) The musical values in the work, however, are more evident here than in the preceding recording from Stuttgart by way of Period, or in the abbreviated "live" performances that have been given far and wide by the Vienna Choir Boys.

Smoothly played under the direction of John Pritchard (who learned his Mozart from Fritz Busch at Glyndebourne), artfully sung by the light-voiced Hollweg and the sonorous Berry—I can't say too much that is creditable for Kmentt—it adds to a totality hardly describable in words: a creation of a twelve-year-old that is still worth grown-up interpretative effort. Lots of it is formalized and not much of it is musically memorable, but the mere professionalism of the sub-teen creator helps one to understand some of the miracles to come. Remarkably clear sound.

The Land of Lehar

LEHAR: "The Land of Smiles." Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Erich Kunz, Nicolai Gedda, and Emmy Loose, with the Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Otto Ackermann. (Angel 3507, \$5.95/4.95.)

SINCE New York has not been fortunate enough to have had a full-scale performance of this Lehar score in recent years, it comes to my ears as a "novelty" and, for all the fact that it is a score of years old, a delightful one. The natural first question is—considering the people involved—"Is it another 'Merry Widow'?" Not quite, but a near enough miss to qualify for the best possible treatment Angel can give it, to which