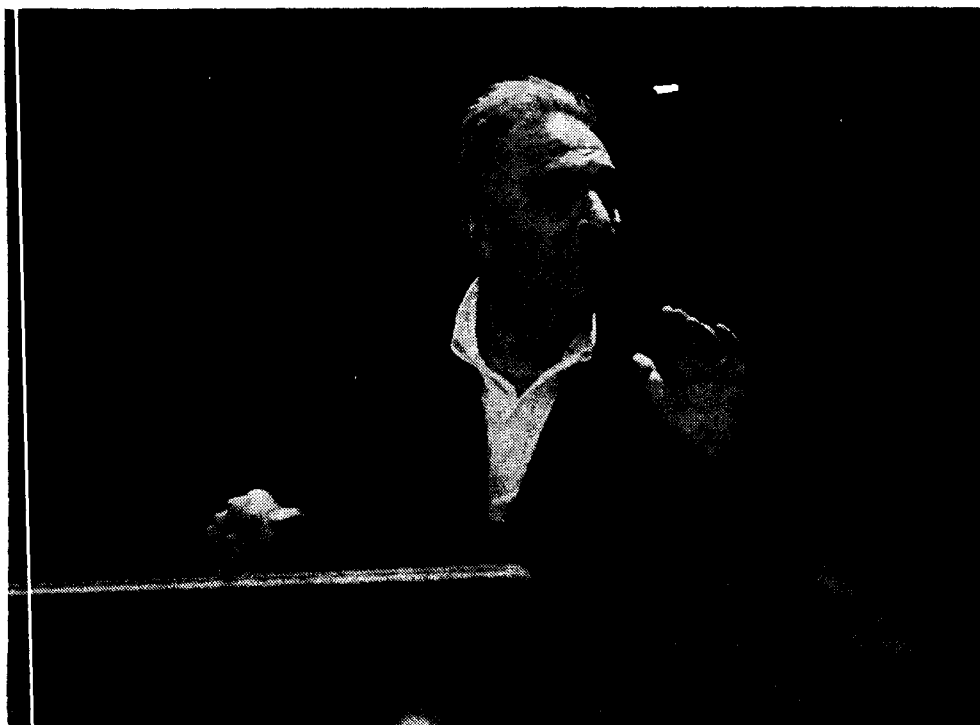


SR AUDIO FAIR SECTION

THE BRAHMS OF BRUNO WALTER

By EDWARD CUSHING



"... a man of feeling."

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COLUMBIA'S new Brahms album (ML-4927), comprising the four symphonies, the "Academic Festival" and "Tragic" overtures, the Haydn variations, and a handful of Hungarian dances, provides on the whole a very good summation of Bruno Walter's qualities as a conductor. The recording is quite satisfactory (the E minor symphony is, I suspect, a reissue of ML-4472), if not up to the very latest and highest hi-fi standard, the graph of which, as I have plotted it, reminds me of an old World War I song: "Going up, going up, like a rocket gone insane." It reproduces the characteristic sound of the New York Philharmonic-Symphony playing under the direction of a respected but not demonic conductor—a sound which, like the taste of some excellent but not superlative wines, is characterful but rather heavy and rough. The Philharmonic-Symphony has had a somewhat similar sound off and on records for a good many years and under a good many different conductors, including Toscanini, each of whom has modified it in his own particular way without ever succeeding in imparting to it an ultimate polish. Columbia's engineers are to be congratulated on rendering it here with so much verisimilitude, even if they failed to produce recordings which, like a few current RCA's, are naturals for demonstration-booth purposes at the audio fair.

This particular Columbia collection of four twelve-inch discs is represented as a somewhat belated tribute to Bruno Walter on his seventy-eighth birthday, which occurred nearly a month ago, and listening to it I have been trying to put my finger on those qualities which distinguish Walter from his peers. It seems to me that this is above all else affectionate music-making. Generalizing largely and rather hastily, I should say that Toscanini marshals notes before us like a drillmaster, making them exe-

cute intricate formations with almost incredible precision and high style; that Furtwängler adds, subtracts, multiplies, and divides them for us on a blackboard ("Euclid alone has looked on beauty bare"), and that Beecham holds them up before us like a connoisseur exhibiting objects in a prized collection. But Walter confides them to us with an infinitely tender solicitude. He *loves* music, and he presents it as a parent an idolized child: "See," he says, "how beautiful she is!"

In other words, where Toscanini is a man of will, Furtwängler a man of intellect, and Beecham a man of taste, Walter is a man of feeling. This is the source of both his strength and his weakness—of his ability in performances of works for which his feeling is surest to achieve a natural and affecting intimacy of expression, to take us deeper into the music, closer to its secret living center, than almost any other conductor. And likewise it accounts for his occasional failures—for the sometimes unfinished and rather uncertain character of his performances of works in which intellectual interest either predominates over or is in perfect balance with expressivity. There is some evidence that Walter knows where his strength lies. People have often complained that Toscanini's repertory was a limited one, that year after year he played the same relatively few works over and over again. And so he did. But the works he played certainly exhibited a wide range of impulses and styles. We heard in the concert hall and we can hear on records performances by Toscanini of music by Gluck, Haydn, Mozart, Cherubini, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms, Dvorak, Tchaikovsky, Moussorgsky, Verdi, Puccini, Sibelius, Debussy, Ravel, Strauss, Stravinsky, even Gershwin and Grofé and Sousa. Walter has imposed much narrower limitations on himself. He has seldom programmed and with only three exceptions known to me has never recorded French or Italian or modern works. (The recorded exceptions are a Corelli concerto, Berlioz's "Fantastique"—a wonderful performance, by the way—and a symphony by Samuel Barber.) His congenial range is from Haydn and Mozart to Mahler and Strauss and he has seldom strayed far afield. He is the product and exponent of the musical culture of a particular time and place—the nineteenth century and Central Europe.

I gather from Walter's autobiography, published a number of years ago, that he thinks of himself as a man of mind as well as heart, but it is apparent, to me at any rate, that he is by temperament and training the romantic who feels first and thinks afterwards, and that his thinking is clouded

by subjectivity. This makes for an easy and intimate identification with certain kinds of music—for example, the music of Schubert, of Bruckner, of Mahler. Music more consciously and exactly formulated, music in which intellectual control and co-ordination play a larger part, yields to him less readily. With Haydn, a perfect extrovert, he has small involvement—he plays him with vigor and humor and the results are charming. But I have never been quite happy about Walter's Mozart. Almost more than any other composer, it seems to me, Mozart should be allowed to speak for himself, with no underlining of his meaning, of his points, no editor's italics in the editions of his works offered to our ears. This at least is modern taste, and there seems to be good reason for it. But Walter's Mozart, enormously admired though it has been and is, is late nineteenth-century Mozart-over-phrased, to my way of thinking, over-rich in expressive inflexion. There is an important romantic element in Mozart's music, the element that as a matter of fact distinguishes it from and elevates it above all other music of its period (for Haydn was quite as expert and ingenious a craftsman), but it seems to me that this can be emphasized, as Walter emphasizes it, only at the expense of elements no less important, no less essential to a conveyance of Mozart's essence.

WALTER has his difficulties with Beethoven too, for in Beethoven as in Mozart romantic impulses are subjected to classic disciplines that Walter cannot or will not always emulate. On the other hand, Beethoven's passion, his increasing subjectivity are matters with which Walter can instinctively come to grips. Toscanini has conducted performances of movements from late Beethoven quartets, arranged for string orchestra, which I should rather have heard from Walter: Beethoven tended increasingly to a kind of "stream-of-consciousness" form of expression, and Walter is essentially a stream-of-consciousness man. The more evolutionary the form, the happier he is with it. In Haydn's and Mozart's and still in Beethoven's music what is said is usually modified by the way in which it must be said. But from Beethoven on the process is reversed. Increasingly content modifies structure, a process as natural and congenial to Walter as it was to Wagner and Mahler and Strauss. The larger, freer forms of the Wagnerian music-drama, the Strauss tone-poem, the Bruckner and Mahler symphony, which evolve from "feeling" correspond to his own experience of the interplay of experience and sensibility.

The finest Walter performances on records are those of Mahler's "Lied von der Erde" and Fourth, Fifth, and Ninth symphonies. I have never heard and I do not expect to hear any better or as good. Nothing else in the recorded Walter repertory is quite on this exalted level, though I would not myself exchange his performances of the slow movement of Beethoven's Ninth, or of the violin concerto with Szigeti (particularly the now withdrawn first version of this memorable collaboration), or of the "Pastoral," or of Act One of "Die Walküre," for any other. The new Brahms recordings are, I should say, very nearly in the same class. They are in competition with the recently released RCA Victor set of Brahms symphonies conducted by Toscanini, but for all the glamour of Toscanini's name and of RCA's almost mirrorlike "new orthophonic" sound (which Columbia so far has not quite managed to match) they are entitled to preference. For reasons implied in the foregoing, Walter has a closer affinity for Brahms than has Toscanini. Brahms too was a man of feeling, a romantic, a sentimentalist, whose difficulties and occasional failures resulted from the affectation of an unnatural gravity and grandeur. He aspired to Olympus and he made it—but by an earthbound, laborious, and sometimes embarrassing ascent. He was praised, while he lived, for a facility he did not have in the manipulation of classical structural and organizational procedures, and he has been as unreasonably damned ever since (but by a negligible faction) for his lack of it.

Walter shares Brahms's weakness—a lack of natural organizational ability; but he also shares his strength—a perceptive and responsive heart and mind, an awareness of the grandeurs and miseries of existence and an ability to convey this with effective intensity. In these recordings the finest pages of the four symphonies—the introductions to the first and fourth movements of the C minor; the first movement of the D major; the first and fourth movements of the F major; the whole of the wonderful E minor—are splendidly realized. Where Brahms is uncertain and awkward—in the main body of the first movement of the C minor, in the Adagio of the D major, for example—Walter is uncertain and awkward too. Writing of Toscanini's Brahms [SR Mar. 27], Neville Cardus (who supplies intelligent notes for the Walter album) said in effect that these performances made virtues of defects and defects of virtues. Walter's performances match virtue to virtue and defect to defect. Elisabeth von Herzogenberg would recognize and applaud the result, and so, I imagine, would Brahms.



MUSIC TO MY EARS

The Old Vic "Dream" in a New-World Setting

TAKEN individually, William Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" of 1595-96 and the incidental but far from inconsequential music Felix Mendelssohn wrote for it in 1842 are two of the choicest expressions in the annals of the separate arts. Taken together, as they currently may be in the production by the Old Vic Company of London which S. Hurok is showing at the Met (soon to be followed by a coast to coast tour), they engage more senses than one would seem to have.

As these involve areas where Mendelssohn made an indivisible thing of music and the Shakespearean text it strikes me that Michael Benthall's direction, the choreography of Robert Helpmann (who also performs as Oberon), and the additional danced contributions of Frederick Ashton are consistently tasteful, atmospheric, and in a real sense distinguished—distinguished by a sense of appropriateness and suitability which might have gone wrong at many points but which didn't.

Scrutiny of an informative treatise in the "Dream" program book by Reginald P. Mander, archivist of the Vic-Wells Association, reveals there are two distinct "Dreams"—the intimate sort, in which Shakespeare's text is interspersed with folksongs and rigorously relevant archaic matter, and the gala kind, in which Mendelssohn's fancy gives additional soaring power to the poet's. This is decidedly of the latter sort, adding the witchery of ballet—the source from which Helpmann and his fair Titania, Moira Shearer, derived their fame—to the other, established elements. The fact that the opening night audience was heard to say, "Too bad there wasn't more ballet" is an indication of the transformation producer S. Hurok has worked in the common thinking. It is, indeed, akin to a child asking for a second helping of spinach. Ashton's interpretation of the famous nocturne as a lyrical *pas de deux* for Helpmann and Shearer, the elaboration of the "Wedding March" into a balletic

spectacle, and the magical realization of the ending *tableaux* spoke for themselves—provided you could understand the language. For those drama critics who rendered adverse judgments it was apparent that they just weren't tuned in.

Here, of course, is the essence of this production of the "Dream." Benthall's company is divided into three elements: straight actors who play the principal speaking roles with a good deal of authority, though (I gather from those who sat further back and to the sides than I did) with less than ideal intelligibility; a dancing-choral ensemble which also embraces the voices required by Mendelssohn; and the nuclear Helpmann and Shearer, who are in more or less equal parts dancers and spoken performers. Helpmann, by disposition and practice, has attained a more even balance of attributes. His is a guileful Oberon, well-spoken and admirable in movement. Miss Shearer's tall, titian Tita-

nia is not of maximum vocal appeal. Show me, however, one speaking twice as well who could move half as well and I will grant an argument.

The substantial fact is that the "Dream" is a fantasy, and those who aren't susceptible to it in terms of Mendelssohn's music are just not susceptible to this conception of it. Musically the usage of the "Wedding March" (fragmentarily) as a curtain-raiser seemed in dubious taste, till it was realized that the scheme of production treated the first episode at the Athenian court and the second with the workman as a kind of prologue, thus setting the two coordinate plots in motion. Putting the overture thereafter provided a perfect bridge to the enchanted "Wood Near Athens," and assured a reasonably audible playing of that wonderful work without the intrusion of latecomers.

THE striking beauties of this endeavor, its atmosphere, poetry, and humor, seem to me composed in equal parts of an affection for the graces of sight and sound, movement and music. This is a production done with love and understanding and enthusiasm, in which the various elements identified with the postwar British theatre have an equitable part.

As anyone acquainted with the Metropolitan knows, it is hardly an ideal platform for the spoken word, especially when the action carries the performers to remote areas of the ample stage. I cannot speak for those who could not hear; but at my place the sound was as expressive as the action.

No valuation of this undertaking would be complete without a tribute to the varied Bottom of Stanley Holloway. His is a musical voice from the outset, full of nuance and inflection, range and intonation. Endowed with outsized head, as the braying ass decked with flowers by the bewitched Titania, he attained some flights of verbal discourse hitherto reserved in musical connection—to Sir Thomas Beecham.

For those who may be wondering, Hugo Rignold, late of the Liverpool Philharmonic, directed the good-sized orchestra with discrimination and taste, a soft hand on the strings and warming one on the brass. Taken together with the opulent settings of the Ironsides, this was a "Dream" to make one happy to be ear- as well as eye-conscious.

—IRVING KOLODIN.

