Letters to the *RECORDINGS* Editor

DRAWING OUT THE AGONY

HAVING READ IRVING KOLODIN'S compendium of my inconsistencies in his review of "The Agony of Modern Music," I still find no inconsistencies. Let's have a look at them.

Kolodin refers to my statement that "in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries gifted composers were numerous. Their purpose was to please and to prosper from approval." And then he asks: "Who were they required to please? Haydn's Prince Esterházy? Beethoven's Archduke Rudolf? Wagner's King Ludwig?" Who is using half-truths here? Or quarter-truths? Or one-sixteenth truths? Was it Prince Esterházy who commissioned the Salomon symphonies? No. It was an impresario whose interest was pecuniary and based on the correct assumption that Haydn's great fame and popularity would pay off with the big public in England. Irving Kolodin knows this as well as I. [1]

Who produced the Beethoven symphonies and concertos? Who commissioned the sonatas and quartets? Who produced the "Fidelio" which took Vienna by storm in 1814? Archduke Rudolf? The answer is no, and Irving Kolodin knows this as well as I. [2]

Who produced "Rienzi," "The Flying Dutchman," "Tannhäuser," and "Lohengrin?" King Ludwig? The answer is no. Irving Kolodin knows as well as I that Wagner was the most famous and probably the most popular composer in Germany before he ever met King Ludwig. And Irving Kolodin knows as well as I that Wagner's fame and popularity were earned in the theatre and with the big public of the time. [3]

Kolodin compares my statement that "grants, fellowships, and commissions" given to composers now represent a sign of debility, with my subsequent statement that the commissions from which Schubert and Mendelssohn lived were a sign of strength, and calls this inconsistent.

Well, people gave commissions to Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms because they thought there was a demand for their music. Commissions are given nowadays not by people who believe there is a demand, but by people who think that there ought to be a demand. Does Irving Kolodin think that Beethoven's commissions were philanthrophy? Beethoven himself wrote: "My compositions bring me in a great deal, and I can say that I have more orders than I can execute. I have six or seven publishers for each one of my works and could have more if I chose. No more bargaining; I name my terms and they pay." What was that about Archduke Rudolf?

Does Irving Kolodin think that the Rockefeller Foundation is giving $400,000 to the Louisville Symphony Orchestra because there is a similar demand for the music that will be commissioned? It is not, and he knows it as well as I. [4]

He offers as an inconsistency my mention in one place of Haydn, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven as popular composers and my reference elsewhere to "the melancholy circumstances under which such composers as Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert lived and died". Life is inconsistent here, not I. That just happens to be the way it was. Some people are better adjusted than others. Some manage their affairs better than others. Some have more luck than others. It is possible to be popular and poor, to make money and to lose it. Popularity is no guarantee of security. [5]

Another alleged inconsistency is my statement that "Rigoletto," "La Traviata," "Il Trovatore," and "Aida" continue to be more popular than "Otello" and "Falstaff," as compared with my later reference to the "rapturous approval" of "Otello" and "Falstaff" at their premieres. Where is the inconsistency? "Otello" and "Falstaff" were rapturously applauded at their premieres, but "Rigoletto," "Il Trovatore," "La Traviata," and "Aida" continue to be more popular. I did not say that "Otello" and "Falstaff" were not popular. I said that the others are more popular. They are, and Irving Kolodin knows it. And I should like to emphasize the rapturous approval "not only by the audience in the theater, but by the crowd outside" at the premieres of "Otello" and "Falstaff" to those who continue to propagate the legend that contemporary music is not appreciated in its own time. For what modern opera have there been "crowds of admirers" outside as well as inside the theatre? [6]

And then we have Mr. Kolodin's reference to my statement that, "Those who have courted the public, such composers as Weill and Menotti, have enjoyed some popular success but little esteem in the profession." He quotes Virgil Thomson's "*Evviva* Menotti" at the close of a review of "The Medium" and "The Telephone." Well, I can quote Thomson, too, and at the close of his review of "The Consul" Mr. Thomson said: "I doubt if it makes musical history . . . Mr. Menotti, though not quite a first-class composer, is surely a bold, an original dramatic author." [7]

So I suggest that Kolodin start all over again and, instead of this either silly or vicious Beckmesserish quibbling, review the book and come to grips with the problems exposed in it which he admits exist. On second thought, let somebody else try it! [8]

HENRY PLEASANTS.

New York, N. Y.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *1. Haydn wrote ninety-two symphonies (most of them for Esterházy) before he wrote the twelve for Salomon. Thus, the composer's "great fame and popularity" were long since established as a composer for the elite.*

2. Before he was thirty years old Beethoven was made a present of three

Guarnieri string instruments (for quartet purposes) by Prince Lichnowsky; Prince Lobkowitz aided him financially from his early days in Vienna; and in 1809 the two joined with Archduke Rudolf in guaranteeing him an annual income. As the dedications of his symphonies (not to mention the Rasumovsky quartets, the "Waldstein" sonata, and various concerti) suggest, Beethoven's favor was founded in high places.

3. Wagner borrowed copiously from all available sources during the period in which he wrote the works mentioned; and it was not until he was rescued from debt by Ludwig that he had the financial ease to accomplish the best work of which he was capable.

4. The distinction between one kind of commission and another is one that Pleasants makes in his letter, not in the book. What is the difference between Benny Goodman paying Aaron Copland for a clarinet concerto and Count Rasoumovsky commissioning Beethoven to write some quartets? Each patronized the best source available.

6. The non-popularity of "Otello" and "Falstaff" are cited by Pleasants as proof that the "non-melodic" works of Verdi lack popular appeal. More people eat frankfurters than steak. That does not prove they are more nourishing.

7. The jury is still out on Menotti. Perhaps a Pulitzer Prize for "The Consul" will remind Mr. Pleasants that he (Menotti) has had esteem from other than popular sources, as he has had professional acclaim from the Music Critics' Circle of New York for "The Saint of Bleecker Street."

8. One review per book is par for the course. If Pleasants writes another, perhaps he will have his wish.

In conclusion, I make note of his flattering reference to my "Beckmesserish" quibbling. Inasmuch as Wagner's character was based on Eduard Hanslick, the Viennese critic of whom Pleasants thought well enough to compile a recent published collection of his writings, I can hardly ask for more honorable company.

TOO MUCH AUTHORITY

I APPRECIATED I. K.'s review of Henry Pleasants's book. But I wonder if such ridiculous, mundane views should be distinguished by his clear-thinking, objective analysis. Not a cocktail-party goes by where some fool doesn't conclude that "Liberace must be good, better even than Serkin. Look at the following he has." This was bad enough. Now they have an "authority" to back up their bad taste.

MRS. WILLIAM G. ERICSSON.

Evanston, Ill.

LAMBS TO THE AGONY

IT IS ONLY the esthetic profundity of the issues involved in what I. K. so aptly dubbed the "Agony of Henry Pleasants" that prompts me to suggest that probably the simplest diagnosis of brother Pleasants's jaundice can be derived from two sources: to wit, Charles Lamb's "Free Thoughts on Some Eminent Composers" and Mary Lamb's "Letters to Vincent Novello." Extrapolating from and interpolating into these verses, we can imagine Henry saying:

Cannot a man live easy and free
Without admiring Ravel and Satie?
Or in his chair in comfort sit
Who never heard of Hindemith?

It would be prudent to ask of Henry, had he lived in 1735:

Would he have gone four miles to visit
Sebastian Bach (or Batch, which is it?)

Mary's answer might have been:

The reason our Henry is so severe
My friends, is he too has no ear,
His spite at modern music is a whim
He loves not it, because it loves not him.

L. LIBERTHSON.

Chicago, Ill.

RIGHT WORD, RIGHT TIME

"THE AGONY OF Henry Pleasants" is an article saying the right word in the right time. It is astonishing that a musical correspondent of *The New York Times* can cook together such a nonsense of a musical book.

WALTER K. FRANKEL, M. D.

Dover, N.J.

ISN'T BACH'S BACH ENOUGH?

OBVIOUSLY Vaughan Williams's utterances in his article "Where Craft Ends and Art Begins" [*SR* Mar. 26] were motivated by his personal distaste for the harpsichord, baroque organ, and other instruments widely used in Bach's day. What else could account for such specious statements, completely devoid of reason, perception, and insight? One would expect a man of his station to be immune from involvement in such capricious conjectures concerning what Bach would have done if he hadn't had to do what he did with what he had!

DON HATCH.

Toledo, Ohio.

ALL TOO FACTUAL

MAY I COMMEND *SR* for publishing "Who 'Forced' Whom?" [*SR* Mar. 26] and thank Russ Nixon for writing it. As someone who was intimately acquainted with the conditions in Nazi Germany, I know every word of his letter to be in accord with the facts.

VERA GOLDBERG.

Jackson Heights, N.Y.

THE NAZIS WERE FOR REAL

I WISH TO express my gratitude to you for printing the letter "Who 'Forced' Whom?" This should serve to enlighten those who now prefer to believe that the Nazi Party did not and does not exist in Germany.

ETHEL LANDERMAN.

Pittsburgh, Pa.

PLAIN AND UNPLEASANT

I WANT to express my deep satisfaction in reading the letter from Russ Nixon,

(*Continued on page* 66)

Is Your Turntable Level?

By R. S. LANIER

AS EVERYBODY knows, a separate "record player" has a restless life in the average living room. It is the pawn of activities like dusting, rearranging the furniture, or finding a place for the overflow from the teatray. So even if it is carefully levelled at some point in time, this state of evenness is at best occasional.

Turntable equipment in large cabinets or in built-in furniture also too often fares badly, as far as being installed in a truly level position is concerned. Most people buying a cabinet machine understandably assume that it is only necessary to put it in the most convenient position in the room. And custom builders are not invariably concerned with, or understanding of, the need for precise turntable levelling.

Thus, the answer to the question at the head of this piece is a loud "no" in a huge number of cases. This is a shame, because a turntable out of level can hurt the performance of a phonograph, producing distortion of the music and high record wear; and it is quite easy in most cases to put a turntable level.

A non-level turntable allows the weight of the pickup arm to push in the downhill direction. The stylus is constantly pushed against one side of the groove, and can be forced into lopsided vibration, a source of distortion. If the sidewise force against the groove is strong enough, the pickup will jump grooves, or break down the groove wall. If you have a spate of groove-jumping on your phonograph, a non-level turntable is a leading suspect. (There are other possible causes for groove-jumping, including friction or binding in the arm which keeps it from moving freely.)

You need just one piece of equipment to find a level position for your turntable: a record with a perfectly blank, flat surface, no grooves, no music. An inexpensive recording blank, twelve-inch size, is just right. You can get one in most equipment or record shops.

Put the blank record on the turntable, start the motor, and put the pickup down gently near the outside edge of the turning record. If the turntable is level, the pickup will stay put, without lateral movement, one way or the other. If there is a slant to the table, the pickup will slide in the direction of the slant. Try the pickup at several points across the face of the turning record to uncover any sliding tendency that may exist. If there is a slide, the direction in which the pickup moves tells you which side of the turntable is low, and you can correct this until all sliding is eliminated.

With record players, this is of course just a matter of propping up one edge of the "box." With cabinet machines, you can adjust the level of the whole cabinet, or you can in many cases adjust the screws on which the record changer rides. With built-in equipment, you can use the screws supporting the record changer, or, in the case of manual players, screws supporting the whole motor board. (Screws which allow for levelling the motor board should be included in every custom-built machine. They can be easily added in most cases if they were originally omitted.)

You have probably noticed that no mention is made of a spirit level as an instrument for finding the level position. The blank-record method produces "dynamic levelling," or the elimination of sidewise arm push *under operating conditions.* A turntable which has been brought to a flat position with a spirit level is not necessarily dynamically level.

The main reason for the difference between "dynamic level" and "geometric level" lies in the bent head of the pickup arm. The friction between the record groove and the tip of the stylus tends to drag the stylus in the direction the groove is moving. If the head of the arm is bent or curved, this pull of the record on the stylus throws the arm off.

We offset this inward push of the arm, in dynamic levelling, by slanting the turntable a little in the opposite direction. The outward slant can be made to just balance the inward push of the arm, which arises from the bent-head geometry. The arm becomes neutral, and follows the stylus without pushing it one way or the other.

On the small record players, with short arms and sharply bent heads, dynamic levelling often means a turntable quite sharply slanted toward the outside. The inward push of the arm with a sharply bent head is so strong as to be a source of serious distortion and very high record wear with small players. Watch it!