

Recordings in Review

Backhaus in Carnegie

BEETHOVEN: *Sonatas op. 13, 31, No. 2, 79, 81a, and 111, plus encores.* Wilhelm Backhaus, piano. London LL-1108-9, \$7.96.

ONE BY ONE, a series of discs are accumulating that mark some of the very high points in the contemporary history of Carnegie Hall, going back to January 16, 1938 (the occasion of the Goodman jazz concert), and coming forward now to March 30 of last year, when Wilhelm Backhaus was the tenant. As was read on the faces of those present and in the press the next day, this was a significant evening of piano playing—but gone forever.

Thanks to London's enterprise, however, it is now available to all, and, on reacquaintance, no less gratifying than at initial impact. Taking the events as they occurred, the level of communication is high from the very start; but, in his playing of the op. 79 (a G major work not much favored save by the most knowing of Beethoven pianists) Backhaus attained an ease and freedom, plus the impulse derived from a sympathetic audience, to make this one of the notable accomplishments of his career.

A measure of that accomplishment may be sensed in the attention of the audience which, without any prompting or awareness that a recording was in progress, is mutely enraptured for pages at a time. And for those who were not able to stay for the encores, a choice sequence is provided—the A flat Impromptu of Schubert, Schumann's "Warum," the Liszt version of Schubert's "Soirée de Vienne" No. 6, and the C major (op. 119, No. 3) "Intermezzo" of Brahms. In each, Back-



Boito—"tremendous illustrative canvas."

haus's command of phrase and period, sentence and paragraph make him as eloquent an interpreter of their smaller structure as the larger ones of Beethoven. Indeed such a performance as he gives of "Warum" hasn't been heard here since Gabrilowitsch-Rosenthal-Hofmann days. The processing throughout is superb, with a real Carnegie Hall resonance and enough applause to give one a sense of actuality.

Oddities a la Maestro

GLUCK: "*Orfeo*" (Act II). Arturo Toscanini conducting the NBC Symphony Orchestra, with Nan Merriman, mezzo-soprano, and Barbara Gibson, soprano. RCA Victor LM-1850, \$3.98.

BORRO: "*Mefistofele*" (Prologue). The same, with Nicola Moscona basso, and the Columbus Boychoir. VERDI: *Te Deum*, with the Robert Shaw Chorale. RCA Victor LM-1849, \$3.98.

THOSE WHO MIGHT have been wondering, at this late February date, what has been amiss with our musical life this winter will find a sharp reminder in the appearance of these two superb recordings. They bring to mind the melancholy fact that for the first time in the mature life of many of us such events are not a weekly promise, or the anticipation of them a seasonal blessing.

Perhaps one should have thought of that in connection with earlier Toscanini releases of this solstice, so to speak, but symphonies and tone poems are always with us. Who is doing things such as the "Mefistofele" prologue with its tremendous illustrative canvas, or the "Te Deum" with its arch of voices rising in almost visible symbolism? Such choral singing as he draws from the pure spring of sound that is the Columbus Boychoir or from the deeper well of the Shaw Chorale is, in an ordained sequence of the metaphor, refreshing to the mind as well as the ear. Moscona's dark resonance is just the color wanted in the music of Mefistofele.

As for the "Orfeo," it is a seminar on the classic style, delivered with that singular blend of restraint and emphasis which Toscanini mastered better, perhaps, than any interpreter of his time. The "Furies" are one order of being, with a tonal timbre of their own, the "Happy Spirits" in another world of sound as well as mythological significance. Some may question the dry sound of the NBC strings

on side one, a consequence probably of the fact that the microphone set-up was that used for the broadcast, and more suitable to total effect than detail.

As Orfeo, Miss Merriman fulfils the Toscanini requirements with a spirit and intelligence that have given her an outstanding position among American singers of today. The tone is not always firmly focused at the beginning, but these blemishes aside, it is remarkably apt for Gluck's writing, with the wanted impact in "Furie!" and a luminous flow in "Che puro ciel" (How pure a light!) that makes one regret that the version doesn't go on to include "Che farò." Barbara Gibson's clean sound is a little thin for the Blessed Spirit, but steadier here than it was in the broadcast (the disc is a composite of rehearsal and broadcast). While credits are being dispensed, there should be mention of Paolo Rienzi, Jr., whose playing of the famous flute solo in the dance of the Blessed Spirits is notably fine.

Ach du Liebermann!

LIEBERMANN: *Concerto for Jazz Band and Symphony Orchestra.*

STRAUSS: "*Don Juan*." Fritz Reiner conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, assisted by the Sauter-Finegan Orchestra. RCA Victor LM-1888, \$3.98.

COMBINING a jazz band, as "concertino," in a kind of concerto grosso with a symphony orchestra is one of those "natural" ideas which has doubtless tempted many contemporaries prior to the Swiss Rolf Liebermann. Being tempted by an idea, however, and succumbing to it are two different things, for along the way there must come a judgment as to purpose and the possible, likely results, since the procedures and esthetic values involved are so wholly contradictory, whatever the individual merit of each mode of expression.

I am not one to argue against artistic synthesis wherever possible, but it strikes me that Liebermann has one advantage over our American composers who might have been tempted by the idea and rejected it: a lack of orientation to jazz, an utter innocence of what is genuine and phony in its vocabulary—hence, a capacity to proceed, blithely with a whole thesaurus of clichés, riffs, breaks, etc., which may sound like jazz in *Mitteuropa* but hardly in—of all places—Chicago.

It is a kind of irony that the Sauter-Finegan band should be called upon to give all in this cause, for between them Eddie Sauter and Bill Finegan have forgotten more about jazz than Liebermann will ever know. Generi-

ally, the sections are described as jump," "blues," and "boogie-woogie," with a concluding "mambo" that has more movement than most of the preceding, thanks to liberal borrowings from the rhythmic repertory of G. Krupa, D. Tough, B. Rich, and other illustrious skinbeaters. It merely proves again what a thing Benny Goodman had in "Sing Sing Sing."

Reiner does what is required of him here with typical flair, though without seeing the score it would be difficult to know just what his functions are. There can be no similar doubts about the associated performance of "Don Juan," which is orchestral virtuosity of a high order. However, there are some notably fine versions presently at large in the names of Toscanini, Walter, and Krauss.

Classic in Crash

ANTHEIL: "Ballet Mécanique." Carlos Surinach conducting the New York Percussion Group.

BRANT: "Signs and Alarms," *Galaxy 2*. Henry Brant conducting a chamber ensemble. Columbia ML 4956, \$3.98.

THERE IS NOTHING quite like being a prophetic voice of a new manner, even if the manner had not been discovered at the time the voice was raised. The instant reaction, after hearing but a few minutes of this recording of "Ballet Mécanique," is that what Antheil was writing back there in 1924 was music for the audiophile—which is to say, a perfect medium for high-fidelity recording techniques.

If, in conveying this information to its public, Columbia creates a demand for more of the same, Antheil's productivity could doubtless produce more clatter, crash, and clang with which to document, as he writes in an accompanying note, that "Ballet Mécanique" uses "a new method of musical engineering. . . ." and is "closely aligned to the introduction of the 'cantilever' principle in modern architecture." In any case, as Antheil endorses Surinach's direction as "according to my every original idea of it," all who wish may now do their historical homework in tone rather than merely reading up on it.

Brant's "Signs and Alarms" is one of those excruciating items in which nobody knows what is going on, least of all the players of the piccolo, clarinet, horn, trumpet, trombone, tuba, timpani, and assorted bar-goods (glockenspiel, xylophone, and marimba) involved. Doubtless the V-I indicator on the recording instrument did a fascinating dance while this was being set down. That might be more worth looking at than this is worth listening to. The sound, unfortunately, is extremely clear.

Operas Anonymous

ONE of the popular pastimes of the earlier Forties—trying to identify the singers, some reputedly well-known, who took part in an anonymous series of opera recordings distributed by newspapers as circulation stimulants in many parts of the country (in New York it was the pre-Schiff Post)—has been revived with the transfer to the Camden label of a substantial sequence of the original. Now much better in sound, and without the noisy surfaces of old, they are cheap at \$1.98, whether one wants them merely for listening or for playing the game.

To take them sequentially, Volume 1 is CAL-221, with the two sides divided between excerpts from "Carmen" and "Faust." Unlike excerpts in more conventional opera series, it is rarely possible to anticipate what will come next. Here we begin with an instrumental prelude (not the prelude) and skip Act I to arrive at the "Chanson bohème," clearly, cleanly sung, but not in a readily recognizable voice. That it goes from there back to the "Seguidilla" of Act I is but an incident, as a refreshing new way of getting to the "Toreador Song." This is likewise well sung, with a virility of sound that might belong to Robert Weede, though I am not that suspicious. It would surprise me, however, were the conductor not Wilfred Pelletier, and I doubt that George Cehanovsky could disguise his voice in any version of the Quintet, which follows. José does not appear until the final act, which gives you some idea of the trend of this Carmen. Who he is, perhaps admirers of Armand Tokatyan can guess.

The "Faust" side is more regular in its sequence, and the auspices (Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and chorus) seem to be the same. The sizable voice of Mephistopheles might well be that of a sizable bass-baritone of the time, the amiable Norman Cordon of North Carolina, and the tenor again has a Tokatyanish sound. And if you wish a reminiscence of the way the young Eleanor Steber sounded, lend an ear to the Marguerite, with some really velvety phrases.

It would be spoiling the game for the many potential players to detail everything, as in the "Bohème" and "Butterfly" excerpts on CAL-222, though the lively soprano of that period named Annemarie Dickey is brought to mind in some portions of "Bohème" and the Marcello is either the pre-Metropolitan Leonard Warren or a pretender to the same kind

of vocal power. Few "Butterflies" of recent times have sung the entrance music more beautifully than this one, with a climaxing D of ringing purity. Miss Steber, of course, also made a later recording for Columbia, though she has never sung the part at the Met.

Volume 3 introduces us to the interesting territory of Wagner, with one side each for "Lohengrin" and "Tannhäuser" (CAL-223). Identifying the conductor from performance alone would be an absurd presumption, but I have heard the name of William Steinberg (then Hans Wilhelm) associated with this disc and the succeeding ones devoted to "Tristan" (the whole of CAL-224), also a side of "Figaro," which shares Volume 7 (CAL-227) with excerpts from "Traviata." Both the Elsa and Elisabeth seem to be the same soprano steeped in the influence of Lotte Lehmann, which recalls that 1940 was just about the time that Rose Bampton was undertaking these roles. Cordon could well be among those present (as King Henry) and the Lohengrin rings some aural bells suggestive of Arthur Carron, a long "promising" member of the company in the Johnson period.

THE "Tristan" disc is one of the most interesting of the series, primarily for the direction (a credit to Steinberg, if it is indeed he), the strong if not always controlled singing of Carron, and the quality in the voice of the Isolde. Which of several big-voiced young American sopranos of the time it might be is open to discussion, but I will guess Beal Hober, who eventually made a Met debut five seasons later, but did not stay with the company long. This affair has some odd joints and splices, but much of it rings out impressively. Both the Brangaene and Kurvenal are able singers in their brief opportunities. I have no theories about the former, but the latter's resemblance to Mack Harrell can hardly be accidental.

With these sample deductions, the fireside detectives' pursuit of truth in the "Aida" (CAL-225) "Rigoletto," and "Pagliacci" (CAL-226) should be considerably facilitated. It may surprise some to hear how well these relics of 1940 sound, but if I am not mistaken, Carnegie Hall was the advantageous recording "studio," and the modernization has been skilfully done. Certainly, the interests involved will more than repay the modest cost asked.

—IRVING KOLODIN.