

Prima Donnas of the Outdoors

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THOUGH the tools used in outdoor recording are largely similar to those familiar in the studio, procedures are different and adaptations of the means themselves may be necessary. By and large, the microphone should be as close to the subject as possible. Sometimes this may be overdone with insects or frogs. However, the problem is usually the reverse. A bird, for example, singing twenty feet from a microphone in the field would be considered in close range; a studio engineer would be in despair if he had to record a prima donna twenty feet from a microphone.

As with all prima donnas, the more one knows about their habits the easier it is to guess what they will do next, and what the chances are of getting the microphones close enough. A study of the habits of birds reveals that many of them have favorite song perches; if these perches can be located and the microphone positioned near them, it will only be a matter of time until the bird chooses to sing from that perch. Song perches often seem to serve as the fence-posts which outline the area considered by a male bird to be his own territory. Here he will not tolerate any bird of his species except his mate. Often most song takes place along the boundaries of adjacent territories.

When microphones are to be placed near song perches, ability to climb trees or to heave a line over a selected branch above a selected perch is useful. Sometimes it is a good idea to place two or more microphones at perches where the bird is expected to sing; when the bird arrives the appropriate microphone may be plugged into the amplifier or the appropriate fader opened up. When it is necessary to leave the microphone in place for long periods, such as overnight, some precautions should be taken to protect it against rain or heavy dew. For this purpose we often use a small cone made of waterproof paper and taped to the microphone cable just above the microphone.

Sometimes a bird shows great interest in a reproduction of its own voice. When this happens it appears that the bird is very conscious of his territorial rights and is interested in driving out the other songster. One of our earliest experiences of this kind

occurred with a mockingbird in Florida in 1935. We were reproducing a mockingbird's song in the house when we noticed a mockingbird at the window. We moved the loudspeaker into the yard and prepared a small perch for the bird in front of the speaker. When the song was reproduced, the bird first tried to find his rival, walking around the speaker, and looking into the rear opening. Finally, perhaps in exasperation, perhaps in an effort to show that he was the better singer, the bird sat on the prepared perch and sang continuously for several minutes. It was then a simple matter to shut off the loudspeaker and open the nearby microphone so that an excellent song was recorded.

We now carry with us a small loudspeaker with about fifty feet of cable attached to it. The speaker can be used in the car to monitor the recorded sound, but we prefer to use earphones for this purpose unless there are visitors present who also want to hear the sounds. The primary purpose of the loudspeaker is to permit the bird to hear its own song in order to entice him to come closer. An almost perfect recording of a winter wren's song was secured in this manner. A winter wren was heard singing high in a spruce tree. Normally these birds prefer the tangled roots of an overturned tree. Because we were anxious to record the song, we used the parabolic reflector, and except for wind whistling in the tree tops, the recording was satisfactory. But we hoped to do better, so we placed our loudspeaker and a microphone without the reflector, in the most likely looking spot among the roots of an overturned tree. The speaker had hardly started to reproduce the wren's notes when the bird came down to investigate. After a moment the speaker was silenced and the recorder was started. Almost at once the bird commenced to sing. He was not more than two feet from the microphone and well protected from any wind by the towering forest and the tree roots. He continued to sing in the same spot for over half an hour.

Some birds sing best on the wing, and we have occasionally solved this problem for such birds as the woodcock and chimney swift by suspending the parabolic reflector from a tripod twenty feet high, by means of a soft cord so that it would make no noise as we aimed it about the sky.

One bird, the water ouzel, of the western United States, seems to prefer to sing on a boulder in the midst of a rushing, roaring canyon torrent. This problem was solved by placing the microphone on the boulder. The bird returned and finding this new and slightly higher perch, hopped upon the microphone, and the only difficulty was the noise of his feet as he twisted about during his song on this new perch.

Some birds sing from high trees, and others from stones in the middle of a grassy field. Most birds prefer to be conspicuous when they sing. Perhaps the most difficult group of animals to record are those of the jungle, where the foliage is so thick that the bird is seldom seen. Here the best one can do is to point the parabola by ear until the sound is heard loudest in the earphones. Often the remainder of the day is then spent trying to find out what bird has been recorded.

When recording frogs, toads, or insects it is often possible to place the microphone very close to the singing animal without disturbing his song for more than a moment. This has the advantage that little amplification is required and background sounds are reduced to a minimum. After recording such species, which often occur in great numbers and may easily be captured, we usually bring home specimens so that there will be no question about identification.

When animals sing in chorus, as birds sometimes do, and insects and amphibians often do, some experimenting must be done to determine the best balance between the nearest singers and those more distant. An effort should be made to create a recording which gives a true concept of the concert.



Drs. Allen and Kellogg recording a bird.



The Vienna Festival, 1955

VIENNA. THIS year's Vienna Festival, the first since the signing of the Austrian peace treaty, provides a welcome opportunity for reflection. For those of us who have lived here since the end of the war Vienna has undergone a remarkable transition, perhaps one of the most remarkable in Europe. The "Third Man" atmosphere, while perhaps exaggerated in the film, was near enough the truth at the time: Vienna was then a dark city, a cul-de-sac politically and culturally, a point of no return. Vienna in the summer of 1955 is a city of light, a city thronging with tourists whose sidewalks are filled with gay cafés, whose streets are crowded with automobiles, local and foreign. The traffic problem—non-existent in 1947—is certainly a headache to the authorities, but it is another welcome sign of Austria's striking economic recovery.

Vienna's Spring Festival, not as widely publicized as those at Salzburg or Edinburgh, is gradually attracting more and more foreigners. And while I felt that the 1954 festival offered a more balanced musical diet, there were many other elements in this year's program to attract tourists whose tastes do not run to music of the twentieth century. For the first time since these festivals were inaugurated ballet played an important role, and the Viennese had a chance to see visiting companies from Japan (Goyo), Berlin and Yugoslavia in addition to their own. One of the most attractive features of the festival was the production of Karl Zeller's "Der Vogelhändler," a charming operetta played in the open air before the castle of Schönbrunn. There were no operatic sensations (the State Opera is busy preparing for the grand opening of its rebuilt house on the Ring), but there was an impeccable production of "Figaro" in the historic Redoutensaal. One evening, after ten evenings of modern music, your correspondent felt a break was needed and attended a performance of Mozart's "Entführung" at the Theatre an der Wien. It was by no means a special cast (indeed most of the "stars" were singing that evening in "Figaro" at the Redoutensaal), or in any way a "festival" production: but what a matchless performance it was!

There was so much depressingly bad modern music, including several huge oratorios and operas of the

twentieth century, that one often longed for the delicate sound of Berg's "Kammerkonzert" or the graceful orchestration of a Stravinsky ballet. This was particularly true of Werner Egk's massive and rather turgid opera, "Christopher Columbus" (conducted by the composer) and Olivier Messiaen's "Turangalila" (conducted by Rudolf Albert). The Messiaen is well known to American audiences but had not been played in Vienna before. If Henry Pleasants is perhaps vindicated by "Turangalila," it is in my opinion the fault of the bad orchestration and the impossible texture of the work, in which gigantic dissonances are succeeded by curious banalities. Moreover, I fail to sense what is undoubtedly sincere religious conviction in the syrupy sentiment of "Jardin du sommeil d'amour." There were, however, happy oases in this desert of stereotyped athletic counterpoint: one of these was a beautiful choral concert conducted by Hans Gillesberger. A group of Gesualdo madrigals was succeeded by Anton Heiller's Motet, "Ach, wie nichtig," for eight-part a cappella choir (1949); this contrapuntally severe and spiritually inspired work, which lasts twelve or thirteen minutes, is without any question the finest music to come out of postwar Austria. The concert ended with Luigi Dallapiccola's charming "Canti di prigionia." Gillesberger, who has made several LPs, is a tireless and sensitive choral conductor, equally at home in the Renaissance, in Haydn's masses, or in modern choral music.

The big event of the season, musically, was the première of Anton Heiller's "Psalmen-Kantate," commissioned last year by the magazine, *Oesterreichische Musikzeitschrift*. The text is based on the Confessions of St. Augustine and a compilation of several psalms, and the work is scored for a very large force including four soloists, choir, and orchestra (with quadruple woodwind and brass). Heiller is a young composer (b. 1923) with a formidable knowledge of counterpoint and choral technique; the work is perhaps a little long (it lasts about an hour) in places, but there are positively shattering moments in which Heiller has brilliantly portrayed the sinister power of the Anti-Christ. The work ends with a radiant and moving song of faith.

The composer conducted the performance, which labored under the usual handicap of too few orchestral rehearsals, but which—like many first performances—was so inspired that the occasional small slips passed almost unnoticed. Heiller's style is on the one hand eclectic, a mixture of German and French tradition (with elements of Frank Martin), but on the other fiercely linear and personal. There is no doubt that he is one of Europe's most promising composers.

The Philadelphia Orchestra under Ormandy impressed the Viennese more than any other visiting orchestra since the war. The wind players and the sound of the brass (one paper commented that there were only three small imperfections of attack in the brass in one evening—a record for Vienna) were particularly praised. The programs were on the whole rather conservative (the first included Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms), but this provided an ideal point of comparison. The Philadelphia is certainly more disciplined than any Viennese orchestra, but one felt that their playing, possibly because of the conductor, was occasionally a little impersonal, their perfection perhaps lacking in the human warmth that Furtwängler's three B's always had. It was a curious coincidence that Leopold Stokowski was also here in Vienna, conducting the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. However much one may object to Stokowski in matters of taste, his uncanny control over an orchestra was immediately apparent: the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra—with its violins all placed on the left—really sounded like the old Philadelphia for minutes at a time.

This was really an international festival. Many composers were here, including Samuel Barber (for the first European performance of his "Kierkegaard Prayer," Op. 30), Rolf Liebermann (for "Concerto for Jazz Band and Symphony Orchestra"), Messiaen, and many others from Germany. The soloists appearing at this year's concerts included Alexander Brailowsky, Zino Francescatti, Nathan Milstein, Ralph Kirkpatrick (with a program of delicious Scarlatti sonatas and the "Goldberg Variations"), Irmgard Seefried, and Fischer-Dieskau.

Vienna, the proud defender of conservatism, has finally succumbed, and succumbed gracefully, to modern music. At the opening concert the Minister of Education, Dr. Heinrich Drimmel, gave a significant speech. "Austria," he said, "must not be a cultural museum: it must devote itself to the present apart from conserving and treasuring its past."

—H. C. ROBBINS LONDON.