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SINGERS AND SONGS

By WINIFRED CECIL

I WONDER if the English madrigalists—William Byrd, John Wilbye, Orlando Gibbons, and Thomas Morley, among others—who composed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could have heard as beautiful a performance of their endlessly fascinating and exciting music as that given by today's English Singers on their first Angel release (Angel 35461). Here is an example of blending, color, and coordination of tone that explains not only why this group has been welcomed by an enthusiastic public for so many years but why intrinsically this recording has so much to offer for the pleasure (and instruction) of the listener. At a time when there are many outstanding vocal recordings, this is a disc that could stand at the top of any list for every quality anyone could look for in a record of song.

The catalogue of current offerings is long, ranging from Handel airs, Hugo Wolf and Strauss lieder, nineteenth-century Russian and Scandinavian songs, and an array of familiar Italian opera arias, to a recital of English songs, old and new. Almost any of these recordings merits a place in a well-rounded collection.

Were he alive today, Hugo Wolf would have reason to be grateful for the outstanding recording Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau has made of sixteen of his most interesting songs (Angel 35474). This is but one more illustration of the truth that, no matter how beautiful the music may be in itself, or how jewel-like in the memory, a great interpreter always has the opportunity to enhance it for the listener, in effect, to create it anew. This Fischer-Dieskau does for the Hugo Wolf songs recorded here. In song after song we who listened were impressed by the singer's fitness for the music, his depth of feeling and his ability to convey that feeling. The three Harfen-spieler Songs are sung only rarely. Even more rarely are they sung by

someone who can encompass both their vocal and emotional difficulties. Fischer-Dieskau's musicianship in the second of the three, where the vocal line progresses counter to the unaccented beat of the accompaniment, is something to note and remember. His moulding of word to phrase and phrase to word in "Anakreons Grab" is the quintessence of fine art. The entire recording is a noble example of what the combination of profound understanding, beauty of voice, extraordinary intelligence, and impeccable musicianship can accomplish in the making of memorable music.

THE currently issued recording of a radio concert given eight years ago by Kathleen Ferrier makes one continue to lament the loss of this remarkably gifted woman. The present disc (London LL-1670) made from a taping of that concert—unretouched, without "adjustments"—proves indisputably what we have known all along: how superior Miss Ferrier was, both as vocalist and as musician. With all the mechanical aids now in use, how many can turn out a record to match the lofty calibre of this? How few could make one the first time around, without re-takes?

The recording would be a classic were it only for Miss Ferrier's singing of Handel's "Like As the Love-lorn Turtle" ("Atalanta") which she colors notably with pathos and varies delightfully with mood and style, lilt and movement, without for a moment losing the natural beauty of the voice or the musical line of the song. There is such a touching conception underlying Miss Ferrier's emotion throughout that I wondered as I listened if perchance she were giving voice to personal premonition. On the other hand, I know that it may have been one more facet of her great artistry that enabled her so to identify herself with the text that I received this impression.

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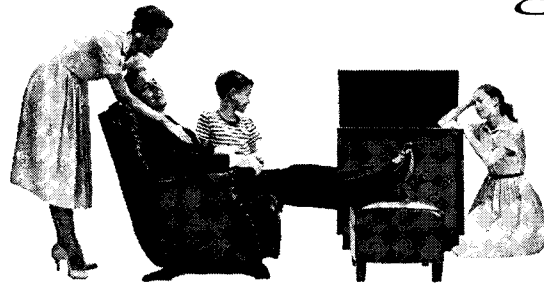
country, is that of Virginia Zeani, presented by London in a series of well-known Italian opera arias, "Lucia," "Traviata," "Boheme," et al., (London LL-1650). This first release here makes one want to hear the soprano in person. Unquestionably, she is an artist of temperament whose record debut promises considerable excitement on the stage. She sings adroitly and effortlessly; her top voice, always warm and brilliant, soars easily. Her interpretations, however, are so at variance with tradition that they would appear to be entirely personal. Nevertheless, both the recording and the artist hold the interest. Pedestrian accompaniments are provided by the orchestra of the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino under the leadership of Gavazzeni.

ONCE more those whose interest is not confined to the familiar must commend Westminster for its excursions off the beaten track. This company's latest adventure in the song field is the release of not one but two records by Russia's mezzo-soprano, Nadezhda Oboukhova, whom the jackets announce as the foremost exponent of that country's vocal school (Westminster XWN-18509, 18510). Mme. Oboukhova's voice is voluptuous, of fair size and good range, although it must be said in fairness that it is difficult to judge any of these qualities from recordings alone. Are we to understand, as the jacket notes suggest, that the singer's frequent resort to heavy chest tones is an approved characteristic of the Russian school of singing?

Ten well-known nineteenth-century Russian composers are represented, seldom, it happens, by songs used widely here. A few of the offerings, heard by themselves, might add welcome variety to the recital fare we know. Four sides of unrelieved melancholy, sadness, heaviness, and gloom, however, work to the severe disadvantage of both singer and listener. We know that the Slav temperament has variety and fire. Would that Mme. Oboukhova had selected—or had had selected for her—material in which she could have let herself go! The piano accompaniments of Matvei Zakharov are lovely to hear; the recording of the piano ranks high.

The Flagstad treasury is apparently inexhaustible. Again we have two pleasurable discs inimitably sung by the great soprano (London LL-1669, 1680). The first consists of Grieg's "Haugtussa" cycle and four songs by Christian Sinding; the second of songs by Hugo Wolf and Richard Strauss. We take it for granted that Mme. Flagstad's interpretation of the Grieg songs

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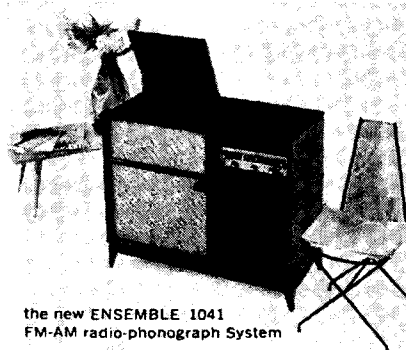
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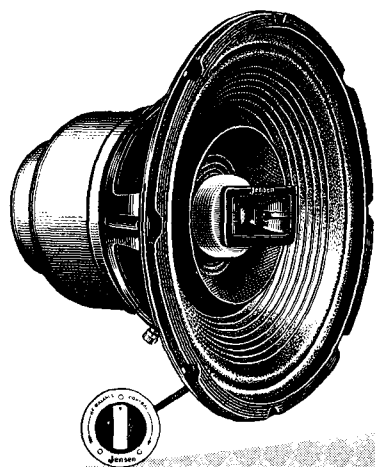
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is definitive. Certainly, her singing is uniquely thrilling; it has never sounded more fresh. No singer of our time has so given the impression of timelessness and infinite resource. We hear this over and over in the Strauss songs which, of all the song literature, require the long line and vast sweep which Mme. Flagstad has been demonstrating from the time she made her bow here as Sieglinde. Edwin McArthur is the sympathetic accompanist.

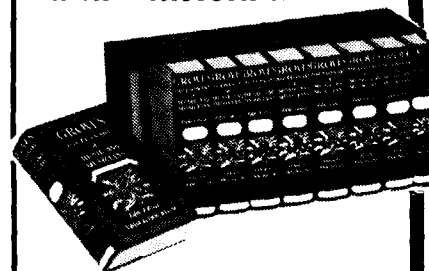
Peter Pears, the British tenor, has given us an "English Song Recital" of contemporary and classic songs of his own country on London's LL-1532. Most of the modern songs are from the daily repertoire. Of these, Mr. Pears makes the most of Warlock's "Yarmouth Fair." Of the madrigal-lute period, Rosseter's "When Laura Smiles" comes through most agreeably. Perhaps the key to the lack of sustained interest here is the want of variety of any kind—perhaps of imagination—on the part of the singer.

Mr. Pears's singing would be more persuasive, and the record would be greatly improved, if his diction had the clarity and distinctness which the texts deserve. Too often in his piano singing—almost always falsetto—his words lose their character, and even their identity, as if, for some reason, consonants could be dispensed with at will. Should not English be sung with as much loving care as our distinguished actors on the dramatic stage have learned to speak it? The accompaniments of composer Benjamin Britten and lutenist Julian Bream are exemplary.

NO better illustrations of the appeal of great art, the total denial of frontiers or limits, could be provided than these recordings. Here are artists of English, German, Norwegian, Romanian, and Russian birth, trained in how many schools, singing songs in many languages, with an appeal for all. All the records have merit, each in its own way has distinction, some approach greatness. Naturally, some of the singers possess more opulent physical instruments than others but, without exception, every one has something important to say and, what is notable, succeeds in saying it in his own way through his chosen medium.

Or should we put it this way? By employing a personal artistry in the service of music that belongs to us all each of these singers has succeeded in giving unique and valid pleasure. Both the music and the artists are thus enhanced. What more can be asked of a singer, or of any musician, than that he give this kind of genuine life to the music on the printed page?

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PURE AND SIMPLE

By MARIE CHAY

MY GRANDMOTHER makes very little distinction between an artist's life and his work. If a novelist writes of violence and sex and shoddiness, it is obvious that he is obsessed by those things and that they are practically his whole life. If a painter does anything besides billboard pictures of fresh, vacuous, ever-smiling perfect types, my grandmother knows him for the depraved self he is, no matter how well he has been able to hide that side from anyone else.

Thus, in opera, my grandmother connects the role with the singer, and nothing anyone can say will change her in this. The ideal role, for my grandmother, is not too young a mother of not too few children who looks like a madonna and acts like one, and who has, has had, or will have only one husband, always the same one. This paragon does all her own housework, marketing and everything else connected with a home and family, and it never even occurs to her to think of another man besides her husband.

This, to my grandmother, is almost the only proper role for an Italian woman to appear in. With men, this is a little different, even with Italian ones, much as my grandmother hates to admit this.

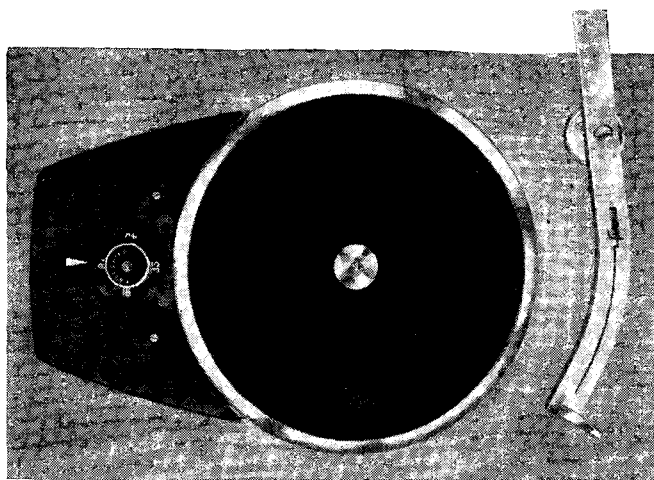
"Who would ever pay to see and hear a woman singing such a role, even an Italian woman?" my grandfather never tires of asking her when she is on this subject, which is often. "That can be seen free every day in any home."

"It's not the same thing," my grandmother says to him as she would to an importunate child, but she never explains why.

Since, as my grandfather has many times pointed out to her, nothing is ideal in this world, though my grandmother has never admitted this if it concerns Italians, she has become reconciled to having Italian women opera singers appear in other roles besides her ideal one. This, however, doesn't mean just any role. My grandmother still has her standards.

Any Italian opera star is welcome to appear as Leonora, Aida, or Santuzza, and certainly my grandmother will permit them to be Gilda, a poor creature who would not have been guilty of anything had she not been forced to it.

"What can a young, innocent girl



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