

The Sound of "Finnegans Wake"

By WALTER STARKIE

WE RECOMMEND Dominic Behan's record, "Finnegans Wake and other Irish Folk-songs" (Folk-Lyric FL 113, \$4.98), not only to Joycean enthusiasts who wish to hear some of the ballads used by the writer as "leitmotiv" to his great extravaganza, but to all who wish to hear the musical chronicles of Ireland's century of troubles, sung in a traditional unaffected manner, without the gags and stage-Irish tricks that are the besetting sins of many of the professional ballad singers who cater to the tourist audiences in the so-called singing pubs in Dublin today. Dominic Behan has a wide emotional range, and the ballads he has selected range from "Finnegans Wake," one of the 1,500-odd songs Joyce used in his *magnum opus*, to "Kelvin Lass," a Glasgow-Irish ballad, and "Boston Burglar," a penny broadside written in Ireland and brought to America by sailors and adapted to Charlestown, the barracks prison notorious in American life for close on 200 years and demolished only a few years ago.

When sung by Dominic, or his brother Brendan Behan, the dramatist, those Dublin ballads give us a sense of the past and present as being one: a conception which, as Goethe says, infuses a spectral element into the present. The ballads possessed a deep significance for the Irish in the penal years of the eighteenth century, and in the famine-haunted nineteenth century when the ballad-singer was the country's chronicler.

Since the people in those days were denied any instruction in their own language, they turned to English for spreading the news, and ballads on every conceivable theme, from courtship to politics, were carried through the country and hawked at fairs. They recorded the events of local history, murders, burnings, and deaths of priests and political leaders, such as Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone, and they gave the popular view of home and foreign affairs in peace and war. They were altered and resung in the home, by the fireside, or at the ale-house. Often, too, they were sung to airs completely different from those with which the professional ballad singer was acquainted. "Van Diemen's

Land," so affectingly sung by Dominic Behan, describes the sufferings of the Irish shipped out in droves when Britain established prison settlements in New South Wales (Tasmania):

They ranked us off like horses and they
sold us out of hand
And they yoked us to the plough, brave
boys, to plough Van Diemen's land.

The tune the ballad was sung to, however, was significantly an ancient Irish Keening song.

Whereas Ireland's patriotic songs, unlike those of the Scots, are commonplace and conventional, her street ballads are striking in their brutal stoicism and savage humor, but only Irish ears can appreciate the underlying tenderness in the ballad entitled "Mrs. McGrath." She had made a soldier out of her son Ted, "with a scarlet coat and a big cocked hat," but when he sails home to her after seven years in the British army she sees her Ted without any legs "and in their place he has two wooden pegs." She cries out to him: "Oh then were ye drunk or were ye blind that ye left yer two fine legs behind, or was it walking upon the sea?" She is as remorselessly realistic as the soldier's sweetheart in a similar ballad, who addresses thus her sorely wounded gallant, home from the wars:

You haven't an arm and you haven't
a leg,
You're an eyeless, noseless, chickenless
egg,
You'll have to be put in a bowl to beg—
O Johnnie I hardly know you!



"Finnegans Wake" was used by James Joyce as a symbol because it is a genuine ballad, over a century old, in which the author never intrudes on the narrative, and the moral is that life is in constant movement and change, and nothing is lost, even death. Tim Finnegan fell from a builder's ladder as a result of imbibing whiskey in a pub before he went to his work. But whiskey, or *Uisge Beatha*, means "the water of life," and may cure as well as kill, and at Tim's uproarious wake some liquor, which by chance spills on him, revives him from the dead. Finnegan rising from the dead is the legend of life in the hereafter: Man's other self, and above all, a humorous Joycean tirade against metaphysics.

Our second Irish record is a contrast, for the Gunn family transports us far away from the smoky Guinness-laden atmosphere of the Dublin hostelry or the slum tenement to more sophisticated surroundings in the suburbs where Dad and Mum, amateur musicians, have always encouraged their children to sing together. Lieutenant Colonel Gunn, a serving soldier, and his wife Lil, discovered to their delight that their children, as they grew up from babyhood, all loved to sing, and whenever one of them started a song, the others would join in, each selecting his or her own harmony. With the exception of one daughter they all live under the same roof, and are able to work constantly at their singing together and create an artistic ensemble. This recording (Washington WR 417, \$4.98) was made in Dublin after an evening spent at home with the Gunn family, and is an admirable illustration of the wit and charm of Irish minstrelsy today. Dad, though he has not much voice left, gives a touch of the Colonel Blimp of the past with his stilted rendering of the "Ould Orange Flute," and is an admirable foil to his son Hugh, who sings with spirit the Irish rebel song "Whack Fol de Diddle." Hugh, by the way, is an actor who has played at the Abbey and Gate theatres and is a talented guitar player as well as a singer. The highlights of the whole program are the *Notai* or rhythmic songs in Gaelic, composed by a young Irish composer, Gerald Victory, and the deep pathos of the Famine song sung by the girls. It was so sensitively sung that it left us with a haunting memory of sadness which all the rest of the program could not dispel. It is interesting to note how characteristic a use is made in Ireland today of the guitar as an accompanying instrument. The minstrels have gaelicized the Spanish instrument and made it produce effects of a small muted harp.

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High Fidelity to What?

By EDGAR VILLCHUR

I REMEMBER an exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, during the late Thirties, of "high fidelity" reproductions of watercolor paintings. Life-size reproductions were hung side by side with the originals, and it was often difficult or impossible to tell them apart. There was no question in anyone's mind about how to judge the quality of these prints. The only criterion was accuracy. The public that visited the exhibit was used to looking at paintings, and thus was able to make an immediate comparison between the copy and the original. Least of all did anyone think of the prints as entities in themselves, with qualities independent of the qualities of the originals.

This point of view does not always apply in the field of high fidelity musical reproduction. Only a minority of today's high fidelity public are concert goers. Many have never attended a live concert in their lives; they know the sound of the orchestra or of individual musical instruments only as it is reported by amplifiers and loudspeakers. They may know what they like in reproduced sound, but they have no way of evaluating realism of reproduction.

This partly explains why so much variation is tolerated in audio equipment. The same record may sound very different when played through different brands of equipment, though each brand is equally acceptable in the market place. The evaluation of high fidelity components is popularly thought of as entirely subjective, like comparing the tone of one violin to another. But is rather more like holding a facsimile up to its original.

For similar reasons high fidelity demonstrations, such as the annual hi-fi shows, get away with a lot of sound that is startling but essentially non-musical. Some of the "reproduced" sound that greets the show visitor is necessarily unfamiliar because it has no live counterpart. A harmonica blown up to the dimensions of a theatre organ is a new and different instrument. A crooner whispering into a microphone an inch away invents a new sound; his unamplified voice is never heard in public. A combination of bongo drum, triangle, and electric guitar creates a *tutti* which one may like or dislike but which is essentially unique, lacking any

equivalent in one's memory to serve as a live standard. Such sound can be accepted as a self-sufficient entity, like an old calendar chromo. But any resemblance to live music or to painting is purely coincidental, and the science of reproduction is not really involved.

High fidelity has undoubtedly increased rather than decreased the ranks of music lovers, and there are probably more people than ever who are unimpressed with gimmick sound. Many designers and manufacturers in the field work only for naturalness of reproduction. The designer of integrity avoids like the plague those exaggerations that sometimes attract the untutored ear—overemphasized bass for "depth," overemphasized mid-range for "presence," overemphasized treble for "brilliance." These distortions are more properly called, respectively, boominess, nasality or "honkiness," and harshness.

Fortunately, not all demonstrations are of the gimmick type. Some companies rule out boat whistles, electronic instruments, and "novelty" recordings for serious demonstrations, and use only musical material played at musical levels. There have also been concerts staged with live musicians, in which direct comparisons of reproduced sound to the sound of the live instruments could be made, in the same way that direct comparisons of prints to original paintings were made at the Museum of Modern Art. G. E. Briggs of the Wharfedale Wireless Works presented such a concert at Carnegie Hall a few years ago to demonstrate the prowess of his loudspeakers in recreating music.

Later, Acoustic Research (my company) and Dynakit did a "live *vs.* recorded" concert at Carnegie Recital Hall with the Fine Arts Quartet, and repeated the concert last year during the New York Hi-Fi Show. The members of the Quartet, working in synchronism with a tape they had made specially for the occasion, would lift their bows from their instruments at predetermined intervals and let the speakers take over.

We had planned another live *vs.* recorded concert to run during this year's New York Hi-Fi Show. It had to be cancelled for a reason that may or may not reflect a prevailing point of view in the high fidelity industry. The Institute of High Fidelity Manufacturers, which directs the show and to which AR belongs, informed us that a live *vs.*

recorded concert run at the same time as the Hi-Fi Show would be considered a competing attraction, and would compromise our position as an exhibitor at the show itself.

But if high fidelity is to serve rather than master our musical heritage, it must be tied closer to the live sound, the ultimate teacher. High fidelity equipment must not destroy the tradition of musical sound that it was created to spread, to substitute its own new standards of timbre and volume. The modern electronic engineer, however able, does not qualify as a Stradivari or a Boehm.

The live *vs.* recorded public concert is one method of providing direction to equipment designers and perspective to high fidelity consumers. Transferring concert-hall atmosphere to the home has special problems of its own, but success in creating an identity of the reproduced sound in the concert hall solves the major part of the problem.

Even more vital to maintaining balance and perspective in the high fidelity world is live concert attendance. It might be a good idea for high fidelity shows to sell combination tickets, with price of admission also providing attendance at one of the current concerts.

Sutherland

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this "Lucia" than Miss Sutherland, exceptional as that is. Robert Merrill sings a robust Ashton, Cesare Siepi is still as good a Raimondo as one can hear, and Renato Cioni is an adept Edgardo in the ensembles, though he lacks the vocal authority to carry so long an episode as the "Tomb Scene" on his own. Conductor John Pritchard provides a pleasurable plus in exercising enough persuasion to make the cast and chorus toe the same vocal mark as Sutherland. Another is the inclusion as bonus of "Perchè non ho del vento," which some former Lucias preferred to "Regnava del silenzio." Big, broad recording sustains London's repute for operatic excellence.

As for her other recordings, I'd recommend them all from the first Handel, Donizetti, Verdi to the new Lucia, as a short course in the development of a vocal legend. I'd also include "The Art of the Prima Donna" as much for the few I don't like as well as the many I do. For they embody in her Norma, Violetta, and Marguerite excerpts some suggestions of the conflicts between ambition and aptitude that date to an earlier period of the Sutherland career. Whether they have been finally resolved may very well determine how long the vocal legend will be, and the nature of the chapters to come.