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# Buying a Tape Recorder

By HARLAN THOMPSON

**T**HE HOME tape recorder field, like Caesar's Gaul, is divided into three parts. If they could be considered sociologically, these segments would consist of (1) the elite or upper-class recorders, (2) the middle-class models, and (3) the working-class machines. They differ from each other in (a) performance, (b) versatility, and last but not least (c) price. If you're buying one, you should know (I) just what you want it to do, (II) how strong is that desire, and (III) whether you can afford to get one that will do it.

If your heart is set on a recorder that will give you *truly* high fidelity; one that will record and play back both stereo and monophonic programs indistinguishable from the original source; one which will produce four-track tapes as good as two-track jobs, then you are not going to be let off for very much under \$500. But tapewise, as they say on Madison, you will belong on Park or Fifth.

The middle-class models hover around \$295, sometimes a bit more, sometimes somewhat less. For this amount you can get preserved sound that will please the great majority of users. There may be a few things that the machine can't do. There may be some dissatisfaction with its slower or slowest speed, but in general you will find no major cause for complaints.

The mass market, as might be expected, is found in what we are calling the "working-class" units. The price by now has come down to about \$150. A favorite figure—in deference to the bargain hunters—is \$149.95. Sound reproduction by these machines is about what you get from a new LP record; only the record will get scratchy with use. The tapes won't, no matter how many times they are played. That is one of the reasons for the growing popularity of recorders.

Many recorders in this last category can be picked up for considerably less than list price at discount houses, when a certain model is being discontinued, or when a manufacturer is overstocked. It is well to be cautious about such markdowns, however. There may be a good (or rather bad) reason for the oversupply.

Perhaps a fourth class should be added to complete the picture. It would consist of machines suitable for those

with a desire to tape baby's first words; beer drinkers singing around the piano; little Mary's recitation when graduating from the third grade; or that sure-fire laugh getter, what a hidden microphone hears when an unsuspecting couple is having a particularly private conversation over on the sofa. Most anything that runs will do for this, and a careful search will turn up devices for as little as \$50.

The principal reason for tape is the high quality of sound it affords—a quality that does not diminish with repeated playings. There are many who, on buying a favorite record, play it once to clean out the grooves and on the second playing commit it to tape. Putting the record away for safe keeping is rather like a lady's leaving her diamonds in the bank vault and wearing paste replicas to the opera—except that in this case the replica is about as brilliant as the original.

The presence of so much fine music on the air is largely responsible for the present recorder boom. This is particularly true now that more and more FM radio stations are broadcasting more and more programs in stereo multiplex. Now that both tracks, in FM, can be equally excellent, the building of a stereo library need only be limited by time, perseverance, and the cost of raw tape.

From a strictly legal standpoint it is probably an invasion of copyright to take recordings off the air; but since there is no control of such broadcasts for profit, there surely should be none when they are preserved for private use.

For those searching for top quality, some facts should be borne in mind. It is no easy matter to produce a machine in the \$500 price range that will measure up to what the highly discriminating customer demands. The professional units used by radio networks and phonograph companies cost up into the thousands. In the opinion of those whose business is servicing, not selling, recorders, the ones without any deficiencies whatever can be counted on one hand, even if a finger or two are missing. Among this select group is a brand new model being put out by one of the industry's most famous companies to replace a machine that turned out to be sadly lacking in one important function (elimination of cross-talk).

When prerecorded tapes went from

two tracks to four in order to get twice as much on a reel and thus become more competitive with LP records, the recorder manufacturers had to follow suit. This presented several difficulties. One was the matter of cross-talk, which is professional jargon to describe what happens when sound from one track gets mixed up with the sound from the track next to it. With four separate tracks on a one-quarter-inch width of tape they can't be very separate. It takes the utmost precision in making the recording and playback heads, as well as regulating the movement of the tape, to eliminate this problem.

**T**HERE are even greater difficulties when it comes to tape speed. In the early days of magnetic recording, first-class results required a tape speed of fifteen inches per second. Professional recorders still do. Later, however, improvements made it possible to reduce the speed to seven and one-half inches. Still later machines were brought out with a second speed of three and three-quarters i.p.s., and there are even some now with a third speed of one and seven-eighths inches. Each reduction in speed diminishes the machine's range of sound and increases its "wow" and "flutter."

Except for wishful thinking by some manufacturers, it is generally agreed that three and three-quarters inches is not fast enough for flawless recording of music, particularly the sound of piano, harpsichord, open strings, and sustained notes from the woodwinds. For that reason prerecorded tapes are made at seven and one-half inches, much as the manufacturers would like to use a slower speed. Cross-talk between their tracks, however, is no bother.

Where some prerecorded tapes are weak, though, is in a lack of response at the high end. This is because they are dubbed from a master tape at sixty inches per second to achieve quantity production. At this speed the supersonic bias should be in the neighborhood of 300,000 cycles per second. This is a pretty exclusive neighborhood. Supersonic bias is the high-frequency modulation that stirs up the tape's ferrous oxide molecules into such a state of acquiescence that they obediently form magnetic striations under the guidance of the master tape. Without it there wouldn't be any magnetic recording.

Both the upper- and middle-class recorders can turn out tapes superior to most prerecorded ones because they are operated at normal speed. There is no cause to denigrate the middle-class family of recorders. At approximately \$295 the choicer members of this group do an excellent job. A majority of them

are of the portable type and come equipped with amplifiers and speakers. Although described as "stereo" (as what isn't these days?), their speakers are usually so close together that the three-dimensional sound effect is more in the eyes of the brochure reader than in the ears of the listener.

Some companies, too, put out what are known as "tape decks." These have no provision for recording. They are simply a means of playing tapes (that have already been recorded) through a home audio system. Since their price is well below that of a complete unit, they save the purchaser money in the beginning. In time, though, the extra cost of ready-made tapes over raw stock will far surpass this saving. But many people are just not interested in recording on their own.

The number of perfectly satisfactory makes in the middle-class group probably is no more than a dozen; whereas in the \$150 class two or three times that many can meet its less-exacting specifications. Here is the real mass market for recorders. Many in this price range are definitely good. Some are definitely bad—or will become so after not too long a time. Therefore the best thing for a prospective buyer to do is listen to various brands and decide which meet his requirements. He also should insist that a musical program be taken off the air or from a record on the machine he intends to buy. If he plans to use one or more microphones he should try them out, too. Hearing is believing.

In all the categories mentioned there will be found a large percentage of foreign-built units. Many are Japanese, although Germany and other European countries also are represented. Some Japanese machines appear under their manufacturer's label, but others with good old Anglo-Saxon names come all the way from Nippon. In general they compare very favorably with the American product and have an advantage in cost because labor and materials are cheaper across the Pacific. The same may be said of the Atlantic.

An added feature on some recorders is a device which reverses the tape at the end of the reel and plays it back in the opposite direction. This is a real convenience as it doubles the time the machine will operate without attention and makes longer continuous programs possible. It should not raise the cost to any great extent.

Even if you have no present intention of recording in stereo, try to get a recorder that will handle it or that can be adapted to it later. Stereo is doing to monophonic sound what LPs did to the late 78s. Tape is the ideal medium for stereo. Forethought now is better than frustration later.



## crunch

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# Klemperer In, Graf Out

ZURICH.

THIS year's International Festival in Zurich did not have a happy beginning. And there was good reason for the local newspapers to publish long articles of apology and for the good citizens of this city to feel ashamed of what had happened. Otto Klemperer, the old master of the German repertory, was scheduled to open the Festival with a performance of Beethoven's "Fidelio." During the last season he had conducted four performances of this work with great success. It seems, however, that his relations with the orchestra men, particularly during the rehearsals, were far from cordial. As often happens in similar disputes between the leader and the orchestra, Klemperer claimed that he had only one desire and that was to help his men do their best, while they (the orchestra men) complained that he did not go about it in a gentlemanly way. The net result of this unduly prolonged dispute was that when the time came for them to get ready for the opening night, the orchestra men agreed to play at the performance but refused to have a single rehearsal. Klemperer declined to conduct under this condition, and the Festival was left without the first performance.

Perhaps to show their indignation, the local radio broadcast the recorded performance of "Fidelio" which Klemperer did in England, and during the following days a long controversy ensued in the newspapers. Rafael Kubelik, the conductor of the symphony orchestra in Lucerne, out of sympathy with

Klemperer, canceled his forthcoming appearance with the orchestra, and a few days later when Klemperer conducted the visiting London Symphony Orchestra in Zurich he was given an ovation.

This should have been a purely local "Affaire Klemperer," but two days ago Herbert Graf, the director of the Zurich opera house, resigned. And this is a great pity, for it might affect many young American singers who have found here an oasis for their activities. During the past few years Herbert Graf has given them more than an occasional opportunity to sing before large and sometimes international audiences. It was due to him that throughout the year auditions were held and the chosen artists were given contracts for two to three years—thus making them permanent members of the Zurich opera. This offered them a decent living and the right to accept engagements elsewhere as long as the dates did not conflict with the regular program of the Zurich opera. At least fifteen American singers have been permanent members of the company, among them Virginia Gordoni, who as Virginia Copeland, sang in Menotti's "Bleecker Street" in New York; Regina Sarfaty; James Pease; and James McCracken. For some of these musicians the Zurich opera has already served as a springboard for other European opera houses, and James McCracken, the young tenor, has been engaged to reappear at the Metropolitan (from whence he came as a *compromario*) to sing the title role in "Otello."

But to return to Herbert Graf. He has done so much for the Zurich opera that the Swiss still hope that he may be persuaded to remain "at his post."

—VICTOR SEROFF.

## LETTERS TO THE

## RECORDINGS EDITOR

### PARKER AND THE UKRAINIANS

THIS is in reference to your article [SR, Apr. 28] on the Ukrainian Dance Company which is currently making a tour of the U.S.

Humor and pathos abounded in the extravagant performance of the rich Ukrainian folklore. Cheerful young people danced their hearts out performing unbelievable tricks in the Cossack dances and the Hopak. This most certainly presented the character of a nation, but only one side of it. For like the two-faced Janus, the Ukrainian character is twofold. On one side is a humorous face; on the other a lugubrious visage. This face is looking at a weeping Ukraine, at a blood-stained embroidered shirt, at a colossal common grave, at Red-Army units patrolling Kiev, at priests performing their duties in veritable catacombs, and at the big Russian Bear stamping out any resistance to Russian Communism.

Such has been the picture in the Ukraine for many centuries, except for a few glimmering periods of freedom. The idea of dominating the whole world came into the Russian mind centuries ago, not with the advent of Communism, and the Ukraine happened to be the first victim.

The article in your magazine portrayed most vividly the striving of the Ukrainian people for their national assertion. It is evident that any jazz band we send over to the Soviet Union will not perform as artistically as did these danseurs-extraordinaires.

W. BASLADYNKY.

Midpark, O.

### RICHTER'S ALLEGRETTO

IN REFERENCE to the review of Sviatoslav Richter's performance of Beethoven's D minor Sonata [SR, May 26], I would like to suggest a look at the score itself. Beethoven marked "Allegretto" at the beginning of the last movement, presumably because he meant allegretto. Pianists have grandly ignored this in recent years (even Artur Schnabel) and have indeed played it as a "whirlwind moto perpetuo" (to quote again from what must be one of the worst sets of jacket notes that has come my way), but I think that it works out much better Beethoven's way. Richter brings a great many things to the surface that are usually buried under the galloping (for once the downward chromatic scale in the coda has sufficient weight), and shows the movement to be much more varied in emotional content than most pianists would have us believe. Just be-

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