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Ralph Votapek—"technical assurance, musicianship, and stylistic authority."

THE VAN CLIBURN CONTEST

By PAUL HUME

FORT WORTH, TEXAS.

FORT WORTH's leading hotel, the Texas, carries on its marquee the line, "Where the West Begins." Citizens of the city affectionately refer to it as "Cowtown" but they do so with a justifiable pride that its stock yards have, within the past generation, been bulwarked by a growing appreciation for the arts.

The two weeks during which the Cliburn International Quadrennial Piano Competition recently took over a large part of Fort Worth's time and attention provided one eye-opener after another for the forty-six pianists, ten jurors, and other observers visiting the city. The line, often seen in books describing famous paintings, "from the private collection of . . ." took on heightened meaning as we walked through the Kay Kimbell home whose walls hold marvels such as Franz Hals's "The Rommel-Pot Player," and his "Laughing Boy with Flute," superlative Rembrandts, Rubenses, and Goyas, Gainsboroughs, Remneys, Corots and Bouchers, beautiful child portraits by Greuze, and El Greco's "St. John."

Another home, that of the Robert Windfohrs, has a staggering collection

of Chagall, Picasso, Matisse, Dove and Marin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Dufy, Utrillo, and Klee.

The vigorous Texas city is also the home of Texas Christian University, in whose Ed Landreth Auditorium all twelve sessions of the Cliburn Competition, plus the closing recital by its top winner, were presented. Dr. Frank Hughes, dean of TCU's School of Fine Arts, turned over the facilities of the building, complete with artists' room, specially prepared press room, and 1200-seat auditorium. Representing his university, which was one of the four groups sponsoring the competition, Dean Hughes was constantly on the alert to offer every useful assistance.

It was just after midnight on the morning of Sunday, October 7, two hours after TCU's Horned Frogs had gone down in defeat before the University of Arkansas's Razorbacks in the football stadium four blocks from Landreth Auditorium, that Leopold Mannes, chairman of the ten-man jury, read out the name of Ralph Votapek as winner of the \$10,000 prize that is only part of the reward to which the top man in this Texas-sized competition is heir. Votapek, who had spent the evening at the football game, where he saw Cliburn made an honorary member

of the TCU marching band, seemed genuinely surprised at the verdict. His victory was not, however, a surprise to many musicians in the audiences and to the other contestants.

It had been a grueling competition, operating on the highest standards from its first announcements through every aspect of its two weeks of preliminaries, semi-finals, and finals.

Aimed at encouraging "world-wide interest in artistic piano playing and further to foster more friendly relations among the nations," it drew contestants from seventeen countries. It was the first international musical competition held in this country to which the Soviet Union sent entries. In addition to this, one of the ten jurors, who were from six countries, was the distinguished Russian pianist and teacher Lev Oborin. The other jurors came from Japan, England, Brazil, Mexico, and the United States.

At one time over a hundred contestants had signed up for the contest. Dropouts came as the arduous demands of the repertoire became plain, with the largest number occurring immediately after each entrant received his copy of Lee Hoiby's "Capriccio on Five Notes." This work, commissioned especially for the Cliburn Competition, was

required of every performer and while highly pianistic and not unduly difficult, it discouraged a number from traveling to Fort Worth, even though Nieman-Marcus of Dallas offered a special prize, a \$500 gold wrist watch for its best performance. This, incidentally, was the only evidence before, during, or after the competition that anyone in Dallas even knew that Fort Worth existed. The Dallas press ignored the contest to a degree that surpasses most records for provincialism.

The members of the jury included five pianists actively engaged in the concert world: Lili Kraus, Yara Burnette, Jorge Bolet, Leonard Pennario, and Oborin. The other five are intimately associated with various aspects of music: Luis Herrera de la Fuente, conductor of the National Symphony of Mexico, Rudolph Ganz, Leopold Mannes, Angelo Eagon, music advisor to the USIA, and Motonari Iguchi, head of Tokyo's Toho School of Music.

Twenty-five men and twenty-one women journeyed to play in Fort Worth. They ranged in age from the contest's lower limit of eighteen—Hiroko Nakamura who won ninth place prize of \$500—to its upper edge of twenty-seven—Sergio Varela Cid of Portugal, and Russia's Mikhail Voskresenski, who captured the third prize of \$2000.

The judges were unanimous in several opinions of considerable interest. First of all, they agreed that where contestants failed to measure up to expected standards, they did so in playing Beethoven sonatas and in the music of Chopin. Interestingly enough, no Beethoven was required until the finals. But among the works required in the preliminaries, the contestants could choose any Haydn, Mozart, or Bee-

thoven sonata. All but seven chose one of the larger Beethoven sonatas, and in so doing, most of them exposed what the judges labeled as a youthful inability or failure to understand the essential character of the music.

The other area in which the judges found many of the pianists lacking was that of chamber music. The Cliburn Competition, for the first time among the major contests, required each competitor to play either the F Minor Quintet or the B Major Trio of Brahms, assisted by the quartet in residence at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. Some of the pianists admitted after the contest that it was their very first performance of any chamber music.

ALL in all, however, the Cliburn contest proved its worth in the caliber not only of its first-place winner, but in the quality of many who participated, and especially the promise for the future of several of them. It was the consensus of opinion that second place winner—\$5000—Nikolai Petrov has a phenomenal, indeed flamboyant technique of prodigious scope. At nineteen he seems likely to become one of the major European pianists within the next few years. Voskresenski at twenty-seven is mature, highly poetic, and about through with competitions. He builds up so great a store of nervous tension that he is not at his best under the strain of two weeks' intensive rivalry. Those who have heard him in recital say he provides endless satisfaction in extremely musical ways.

Cécile Ousset, France's glamorous entrant, has certain qualities characteristic of other French pianists. Her superb facility and control are admirable but the cool temperature of most of

her playing prevents sustained interest. She was a sound choice for the fourth prize of \$1000.

Early promise in the competition, which many jurors thought remained unfulfilled in later sessions, was displayed by Arthur Fennimore, twenty, a former Serkin pupil. There were, however, many among the audience and visiting musicians who felt that his playing was eminently musical, his chamber music superb, and his future as bright as that of any in the competition. Fennimore won the Nieman-Marcus watch and the seventh-place prize of \$500. He, Varela Cid, and Japan's Hironaka, were the three whom the judges rated high enough to stretch the stipulated number for the finals from six to nine.

All three of Japan's entrants placed in the semi-finals, as did all four Soviet Union contestants. Two from Japan and two from the Soviet Union went into the finals. Quite clearly Japan has placed itself among the leading countries in point of turning out well-disciplined, musicianly artists. Miss Hiroko Nakamura, remembered for her lovely playing of the Chopin E Minor Concerto with the Tokyo Philharmonic several seasons back, divided with winner Votapek the Cliburn prize of \$600 for the best performance of chamber music. Making an unforgettable picture picture in a white kimono overlaid with flowers of blue and red, bound by a great, gold obi, Miss Nakamura might have placed higher than ninth had a sudden illness not kept her from finishing the finals.

It was Ralph Votapek, however, who, alone among the nine finalists, consistently combined that balance of technical assurance, musicianship, and

(Continued on page 61)



Nikolai Petrov



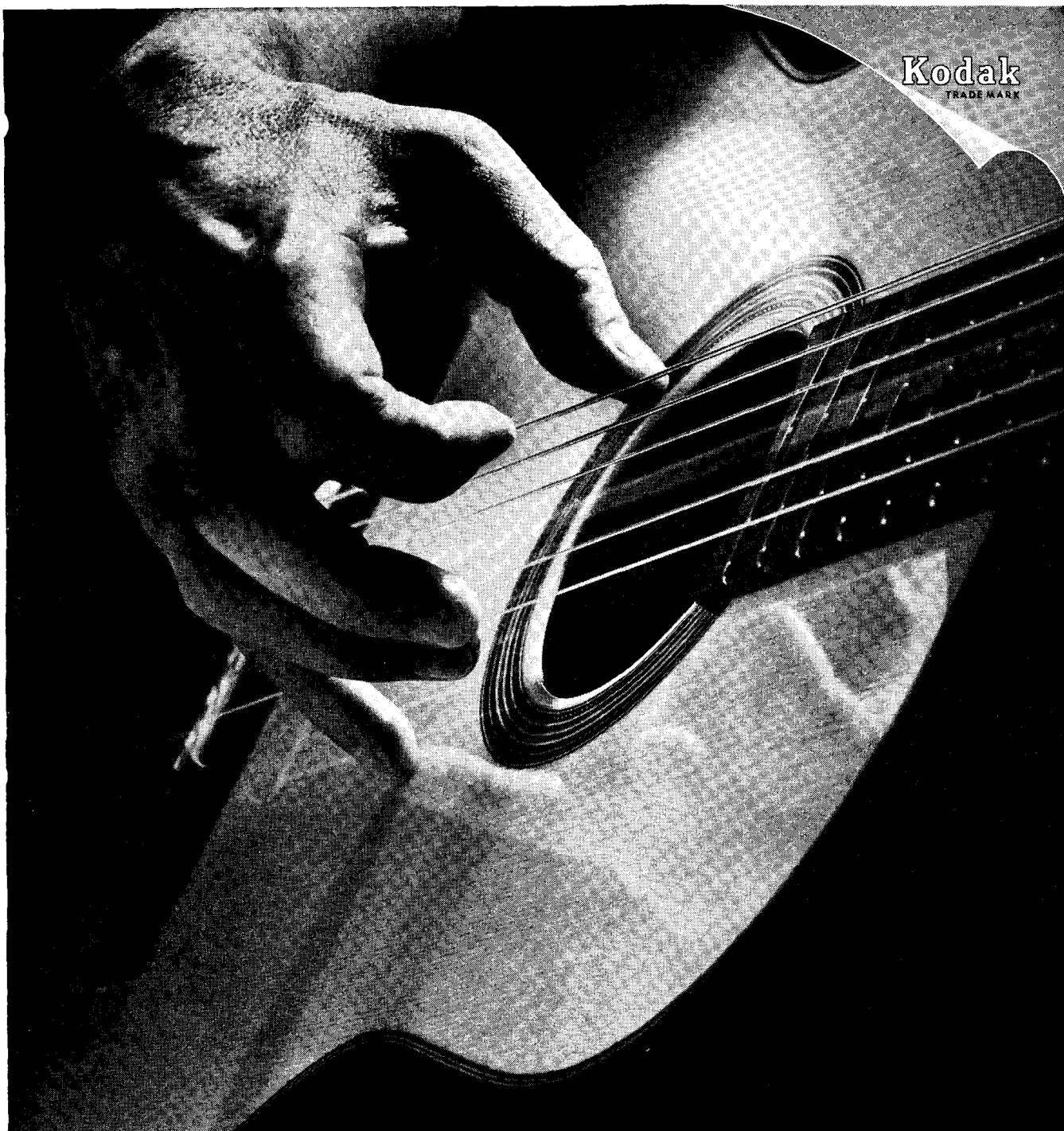
Mikhail Voskresenski



Cecile Ousset



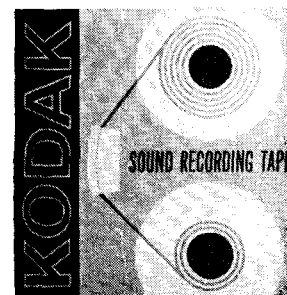
Arthur C. Fennimore



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EASTMAN KODAK COMPANY, ROCHESTER 4, N. Y.

“Walküre” First to Last

THERE is so much that is new and absorbing in the first uncut Wagner opera recording to be sponsored by an American record maker, that some problem of approach besets an appraisal of RCA Victor's “Walküre,” recorded in toto, first to last, on five twelve-inch LPs (LDS 6706, \$30.98), or three tape reels, if it is preferred in that form (4T FTC 9500, \$32.95). George London's Wotan, Rita Gorr's Fricka, David Ward's Hunding, Gré Brouwenstijn's Sieglinde — these are all among the new and absorbing, to take an equal place with the established, values of Birgit Nilsson's Brünnhilde, Jon Vickers's Siegmund, and Erich Leinsdorf's conducting of the whole.

But the only valid approach is, after all, to the whole—for what avail one, two, or three brilliantly played parts in such a musical marathon if some important others are disappointing? Or what avails impressive musical authority at the helm if members of the crew are rocking the boat? So, to borrow a precept from Carroll, verdict first, evidence afterward: this is one of the finest opera recordings in years, and a second leg on what one hopes will eventually be a complete Ring, with (let us hope) Nilsson and London at least continuing on.

It is a temptation to gravitate to the unfamiliar performers and say, simply, “More of the same” for the familiar ones. However, that would be patently unfair to Miss Nilsson who is, after all else has been done and sung, the focal character with Wotan in the sumptuous musical climax of Act III. To my ear, she sounds not only different but better in this recording than in any prior one: singing more, pressing less, relying on flow of tone rather than stress of projection. My inclination is to attribute this to Leinsdorf, who also knew how to exploit Nilsson's forte (literally) when they did “Turandot” together. In any case, it makes for a beautiful experience, especially in such phrases as “Der diese Liebe mir in's Herz gehaucht” which may not, quite, turn the heart to water but are equal to Brünnhilde's objectives of converting Wotan from scorn to compassion.

As her partner in this dialogue, London is no less than extraordinary, considering that his history of singing the “Walküre” Wotan publicly has not yet begun. Some may favor a freer-flowing,

broader sound than London's (I am, of course, thinking of a Schorr or a Berglund) but he makes his the instrument of an imposing dramatic conception in which the many aspects of Wotan's character—determination and vacillation, devotion and disaffection, godliness and humanity—all have a part. And when the opportunity presents itself for the objective to be reached by song alone, in the “Farewell,” London has the command of nuance to do it.

This is a high standard for others to match, but there is no faltering in any part. Vickers is perhaps the least consistent, only because of those peculiarities of vocal production which once seemed a passing phase of his development, but now have apparently hardened into habit—odd formation of some German vowels, a portamento into a difficult interval, a certain awkwardness of phraseology. But he is altogether a superior Siegmund, who suggests the vigorous outdoor character he is supposed to be, and rises to his best vocal effort in the moment of greatest stress: the response to Brünnhilde's appearance in Act II announcing his imminent doom.

Most gratifying among the unfamiliar performers is Rita Gorr, if only because she is about to begin a Metropolitan career in a mezzo category which has not been too well served there in recent years. To judge from this Fricka, she has not only the voice but also the schooling and the intelligence to return

such a role to the prior plane of a Thorborg or Branzell. The Sieglinde of Brouwenstijn is equally rewarding, though in an inverse way. An experienced artist and an admired one in a range of roles from Leonora in “Fidelio” to Jenufa, one had not supposed that she retained so much of command and fine shading to manage the intimate, lyric detail of Sieglinde. But manage she does, with bold style and aural appeal. Finally, Ward (an English basso) is a first-class Hunding, menacing without the grumpiness that sometimes besets German bassos.

As for Leinsdorf, he is in complete control from first to last of a project that leaves nothing unperformed in the nearly four-hour score. I don't find his first act as lyrically exalted as it can be, but he has a fine sense of the grand plan of this score, of its waves of emphasis, a feeling for the trough as well as the crest. The best thing to be said for the recording is that there is not much to be said against it: such good judgment has been exercised in blending voices and orchestra that neither one nor the other is unduly favored. The “Ride” is a bit over-microphoned in order to produce an aural shock wave from the thirteen horns, but I can ride that out in view of the quality of the London Symphony's strings in the music to come (in Act III).

The splendid tape, incidentally, provides one reel per act, meaning only a single break in each curtain-to-curtain sequence. The five disks vary from two interruptions in Acts I and III to three in Act II. The handsome seventy-two page brochure designed by Hy Klebanow contains a line by line translation of the text and an extensive “Walküre” chronology by Martin Bernheimer as well as a detailed synopsis of the work.

—I.K.

“Ride of the Valkyries”—“an aural shock wave from the thirteen horns.”

