

RECORDINGS REPORTS I: Orchestral LPs

WORK, PERFORMER, DATA

REPORT

Beethoven: Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2. George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra. Epic LC 3892, \$4.98; stereo BC 1292, \$5.98.

The attribution of this disc to "George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra" is no accidental deviation from the more usual description of "conducted by" or "under the direction of," but rather a recognition of the very real partnership that has produced the results it embodies. The identity of players and director is emphasized by the fact that the dominant personality is not Szell's but Beethoven's. That is to say, it is a kind of consensus performance, such as a group of chamber music players might arrive at from a matching of opinion based on their knowledge of the composer's style and a thoughtful attention to the playing instructions in the score. I confess to a preference for a little more personal participation such as Beecham provided for the Second Symphony, but this does not in the least detract from the rare order of accomplishment embodied in this crisp, precise, and expertly turned playing. The reproduction is typical of the excellent sound in prior Beethoven releases by Szell and the orchestra, which, with this release, embraces the full sequence of the Nine.

Brahms: Concerto in D. Christian Ferras, violin, with the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Herbert von Karajan. DGG LPM 18930, \$5.98; stereo SLPM 138930, \$5.98.

Ferras has a valid, free-flowing conception of Brahms to convey, and there is no question that Karajan and the orchestra have also. This would appear to be the beginning of a happy collaboration, with one unfortunate exception: they do not go together as harmoniously as they might. Ferras is essentially a violinist of the Franco-Belgian persuasion, which means that he is disposed more to suavity and finesse than to heft or power. He is thus at a loss—especially in heavily scored passages—to hold his own with the kind of Brahms to which the Berlin Philharmonic under Karajan is partial. They meet on common ground in the Adagio, which is beautifully played; but the two allegros leave the impression that the violinist is much further from the microphone than, in all probability, he is.

Debussy: *La Mer*; *L'Après-midi d'un faune*. Ravel: *Daphnis et Chloé* Suite No. 2. Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. DGG LPM 18923, \$5.98; stereo SLPM 138923, \$5.98.

For a while at the beginning of the Ravel, the quality of execution gives promise of a performance to rival the memorable one of Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony. However, the onset of the first full orchestral outburst restores the listener to reality. The technical detail of *La Mer* has rarely been put together with such care, and all the solo players—in addition to Karlheinz Zöller, who is given billing as "solo flute"—distinguish themselves, but surely these are the waters that ran down to the "sunless sea" of Coleridge rather than to the sportive, playful ones of Debussy. As an instance: the dry thump of the timpani with which the demonstration concludes is hardly the sound of a poetic fantasy, in any language. The reproduction is among DGG's best.

Prokofiev: Symphony No. 3; *Pas d'Acier* Suite. Maurice Abravanel conducting the Utah Symphony. Vanguard VRS 1122, \$4.98; stereo VSD 71122, \$5.98.

Neither of these works has been recorded often enough to have become truly familiar; indeed, there is no other version of the *Pas d'Acier* currently listed. The "symphony" is made up of material drawn from the opera *The Flaming Angel*, which need not be a source of prejudice against it—Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* has a similar background. However, Prokofiev did not succeed in relating the material to any self-sufficient purpose in this new usage, and Abravanel's performance supplies no sense of structure otherwise lacking. Much of the interest in the ballet of 1925 has receded into the shadow of other works in which Prokofiev's impulses were better realized. It does project a lyric mood that has hitherto seemed the exclusive property of his *Romeo and Juliet* ballet of ten years later. The performances are competent when the texture is not too demanding; in more complicated sections the intonation tends to become cloudy.

Prokofiev: Symphony No. 5 in B flat, Op. 100. Paul Kletzki conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra. Angel 36227, \$4.98; stereo S 36227, \$5.98.

The admiring commentary on this "sleeve" declares that four sessions were allotted for the recording, but Kletzki required only "three sessions and a bit." Perhaps that was adequate to satisfy criteria of accuracy and absence of errors, but it was hardly enough for conductor and players to arrive at a conception that one can discuss comparatively with those of Ormandy, Szell, Leinsdorf, or Stokowski. It is, in a word, a well-sounding but superficial estimate of Prokofiev, one of those all too frequent examples of a project that bears no sensible relationship to the current file of other recordings of the same music, and that certainly will not hold a place in the catalogue on its comparative merits.

Ravel: *Boléro*; *La Valse*; and *Ma Mère l'Oye*. Pierre Monteux conducting the London Symphony Orchestra. Philips PHM 500059, \$4.98; stereo PHS 900059, \$5.98.

An ambitious conductor of any age could envy the even accumulation of energy and effect in these performances of *Boléro* and *La Valse* from one of the last sessions of Monteux's long life; but a thoughtful one will pay more attention to the artful balance of finesse and imagery in *Ma Mère l'Oye*. It is also a reminder that style is in the conductor, not the orchestra; the French accent is faultless for all the fact that those who "speak it" are far more at home in pubs than bistros. Congratulations are in order for Philips for matching the characteristic Monteux atmosphere with sound techniques that neither overstress nor understress it.

Rimsky-Korsakov: *Scheherazade*. Leopold Stokowski conducting the London Symphony Orchestra. London PM 55002, \$4.98; stereo SPC 21005, \$5.98.

Stokowski's identification with recordings of this work stretches back to the later Twenties when Victor's (not yet RCA Victor's) M-23 offered it in one of the lengthiest albums yet produced in this country. There was another in the mid-Thirties (V-269) and still another with the Philharmonia (made, if memory serves, in Royal Festival Hall). This latest is also the best of them, not alone because the multi-channeling London comprehends under the title of "Phase 4" permits a degree of control over all the details of the reproduction that produces a sound akin to no other, but also because Stokowski's feeling for the music and enthusiasm for its color combinations has lost none of its original zest. For that matter, there are few conductors still with us who share his capacity for arousing an orchestra to participate in that feeling and enthusiasm in such literature.

Tchaikovsky: *Variations on a Rococo Theme*. Saint-Saëns: Concerto in A Minor. Janos Starker, cello, with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Antal Dorati. Mercury MG 50409, \$4.98; stereo SR 90409, \$5.98.

Perhaps if he would write his memoirs, organize a crusade for world peace, or compose an oratorio, Starker might enjoy the recognition he deserves as the world's premier artist on his instrument in works such as these. As he has already proven his pre-eminence in the Baroque literature, this gives him supremacy in a substantial segment of the cello literature. In these collaborations with Dorati, Starker blends a faultless articulation of technical detail with a lively but always discriminating musicianship. He is fortunate in his conductor, for Dorati recognizes the balletic content of the Tchaikovsky score and treats it accordingly, also drawing an artful backdrop for Starker's rightful prominence in the Saint-Saëns Concerto.

—IRVING KOLODIN.

The Resurgence of Pee Wee Russell

IF YOU had asked an avid and "inside" follower of jazz about clarinetists in the late Thirties or early Forties, he might well have answered—with due respect to the public successes of the day and particularly Benny Goodman—that there was a fellow named Charles Ellsworth ("Pee Wee") Russell, who spent most of his time with the displaced "Chicagoans," working in and out of Nick's and Eddie Condon's in Greenwich Village.

Russell's work probably came as something of a shock for those who heard him for the first time, even if they knew his name and reputation. Self-evidently, a clarinetist like Goodman could, with only slight adjustments in his reed technique, slip from an exposition on "Stompin' at the Savoy" to the Mozart Clarinet Quintet. But Russell, with a series of growls, phlegmy undulations, and occasional off-pitch peals, had converted this classically complex instrument into a personally expressive extension of Pee Wee Russell. A raspingly eccentric Dixielander, some thought. Far from it, for every unorthodox sound is a part of Russell's technique and the basis of that technique is always firmly musical.

Russell was virtually lost, like so many of his generation, during that lamentable decade when jazz was either old New Orleans or new be bop, with little or nothing in between, but he has lately experienced a remarkable rediscovery. It may surprise those now middle-aged jazz fans who knew him when, and who no longer read the fan and trade magazines, but Pee Wee Russell now places high in the annual popularity polls. He deserves the rediscovery, as his recent work testifies. He also deserved his earlier "inside" reputation, as a few of recent reissues similarly demonstrate.

The first of these is *Pee Wee Russell—A Legend* (Mainstream S/6026). The LP is built around a series of trios and quartets that Russell recorded for Commodore, an "inside" jazz label of the period. On the face of it, small ensembles are apt to present Pee Wee Russell more effectively than the frayed, Condon-engineered Dixieland groups with which he often recorded for that label, for Russell is pre-eminently a soloist, not a heterophonic ensemble improviser. But the trios available are not ideally handled by Mainstream, for two of them ("Jig Walk" and "About Face")

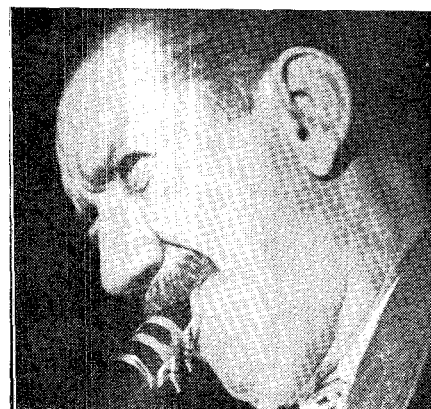
are not included, whereas "Deuces Wild," in which Russell provides moody relief on a vehicle for Zutty Singleton's tom-toms, is.

Not that the selections included all feature ideal performances. On "Back in Your Own Backyard" and "Rose of Washington Square," an apparent unfamiliarity with the material has both Russell and pianist Jess Stacy falling back on their own pet phrases. However, on "Keepin' Out of Mischief" each man comes up with striking and often amusing ideas in paraphrase of Fats Waller's melody. Similarly, in his solo with a larger group on "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Russell is so full of ideas and so effective in his handling of stop-time breaks that the original melody virtually (and justifiably) disappears.

A performance like that one leads us to a second test for a major jazzman: Can he extemporize a good melody without relying on paraphrase? There are two blues included in the LP on which Russell does that. On "D.A. Blues" he offers some touching lyric musings, perhaps under the influence of Stacy's lovely piano choruses and his gentle touch. On "The Last Time I Saw Chicago," with the sharper and more percussive touch of pianist Joe Sullivan, Russell muses *sotto voce* over keyboard tremolos and then expansively proclaims his conclusions.

The LP is filled out with three other selections by large ensembles in which Russell happened to be present, and, aside from a complaint about Mainstream's usual over-all skimpiness of playing time, there is again a question of selection. Two of Russell's grandest recorded statements, both made for Commodore, do not appear here. The first of these is his half-chorus on "Embraceable You," a truly exceptional invention that barely glances at Gershwin's original, tellingly placed among the statements of Bobby Hackett, Bud Freeman, and Jack Teagarden, which by contrast variously embellish and ornament the original. This performance found its way into a catch-all Mainstream anthology called *Era of the Swing Trumpet* (S/6017), as did Russell's equally inventive solo on "Lady Be Good," which is dropped into *Eddie Condon: A Legend* (Mainstream S/6024).

To turn from Pee Wee Russell to clarinetist and soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet is not to move backward,



Russell—"...unorthodox sound is a part of (his) technique."

for, although Bechet was a major jazzman by the teens of this century, he remained a timeless classic player all of his life. *Bechet of New Orleans* is a new release in the RCA Victor "Vintage" series (LPV-510) and it contains some superb Bechet. Included are small statements such as his moving contrapuntal responses to trumpeter Red Allen on "Egyptian Fantasy," his breaks on "Shake It and Break It," his lovely moment on "Save It, Pretty Mama," and his magnificent and fully original half-chorus on "Sleepytime Down South." And there are larger statements like Bechet's solos on "Baby Won't You Please Come Home" and his fine chorus on "None of This Jelly Roll" (ah, how effortlessly he could seem to inspire a whole ensemble!).

Obviously I am not inclined to bite the hand that feeds us such a fortifying repast as this. But I am not going to lick it either. The LP has Bechet's "one-man band" performance of "Sheik of Araby," an early example of multiple recording, but this version is a previously unreleased "take," and it is no problem to see why it was previously unreleased. We are given Bechet as a sideman on a 1939 "Jelly Roll" Morton performance that is no great credit to Morton. And a "Muskrat Ramble" with an NBC studio band that plays a parody of jazz. Also, selections by the same pick-up ensembles are programmed apart, when it would have been much more musically profitable if they had been placed side by side. Finally, the premise of this set is that Bechet's music is to have two LPs in the Vintage series (so far, so good), this one devoted to "traditional" pieces associated with New Orleans, a later one to be devoted to Bechet and the blues (odd programming). However, one of the best tracks here is "Texas Moaner" with two Bechet solos, on clarinet and on soprano saxophone, separated by an interlude from Charlie Shavers's trumpet. Shavers is showy but his solo does point up, by contrast, the untrammelled eloquence of Sidney Bechet. And "Texas Moaner" is a twelve-bar blues.

—MARTIN WILLIAMS.