

# RECORDINGS REPORTS II: Miscellaneous LPs

WORK, PERFORMER, DATA	REPORT
Bliss: Quintet for Clarinet and Strings (1931); Quintet for Oboe and Strings (1927). Melos Ensemble of London. Everest 6135, \$4.98; stereo 3135, \$4.98.	It would be a hardly relishable challenge to identify the composer of these works without knowing his name—the main components suggesting Delius, Vaughan Williams and Brahms. Taken together, however, the totality begins to sound something like Bliss (once you know his is the name to go with it). Of the two works, the Oboe Quintet is somewhat more individual, perhaps because it has a borrowed folk tune here and there which adds to the appeal of the whole. It is also performed with spectacular control, and every bit of emphasis wanted, by Peter Graeme, who studied with Leon Goossens, for whom Bliss wrote the work and who is now a professor at the Royal College. Gervase de Peyer is, of course, probably England's best clarinetist, and performs up to his standard here. He does not, however, have quite as much to work with as Graeme does. The Melos Quartet, which is led by Emanuel Hurwitz, violin, also includes Ivor McMahon, violin; Cecil Aronowitz, viola; and Terence Weil, cello. Very good recording in both instances.
Brahms: Hungarian Dances. Julius Katchen, piano, with Jean-Pierre Marty, piano. London CM9473, \$4.79; stereo CS 6473, \$5.79.	Of the numerous discs devoted by Julius Katchen to the complete piano music of Brahms, this is likely to attract the most attention and retain interest the longest, bringing together, as it does, works which are rarely performed with the blend of scholarship and spirit that he (and his associate) impart to them. In accordance with the final form in which they are left by Brahms, Katchen performs Nos. 1-10 as piano solos and the remainder in duet form with Marty. As the sequence takes in half a dozen of the most-played works associated with the name of Brahms, it is improbable that the tempos and phrasings will suit everyone; but the area Katchen and Marty have cultivated is one that many listeners can occupy comfortably. Now and then they tend to rush a tempo or be carried away by the sentiment of what they are doing, but of possible alternatives, those are preferable ones. In short, an offering that can be highly recommended.
Chopin: Sonata (Op. 65). Prokofiev: Sonata (Op. 119). Gregor Piatigorsky, cello, with Rudolf Firkusny, piano. RCA Victor LM 2875, \$4.79; stereo LSC 2875 \$5.79.	If precedents of the past are any guide to the future, the probability is that this issue, however good, is not long for the "catalogue"—which means that those to whom the prospect appeals should act upon it promptly. Of especial value in the partnership of Firkusny and Piatigorsky is the lack of compulsion to dominate on the part of either performer. They not merely give lip service to the theory of equality, but make every effort to put it into practice—with, largely speaking, success. This success is more consistently present in the Prokofiev than in the Chopin, the latter asking some concession-to-weakness and special affinity for style which are not always forthcoming. But the Prokofiev is admirably suited to what the performers have to provide and it comes off very well.
Debussy: Preludes. Leonard Pennario, piano. RCA Victor LM 7036, \$9.58; stereo LSC 7036, \$11.58.	Whoever's taste is reflected in the choice of Pennario for this assignment, it is poorly justified by the results. As for comparison with such performers as Cortot, Schmitz and Rubinstein who have recorded this sequence (either in whole or in part) for the same label and thus accounted for its standard, it is not merely odious, it is nonexistent. What Pennario brings to this enterprise is much the same as the attributes he brings to other enterprises of the past—considerable fluency, a more than minimal amount of musicianship, and some qualities of animation to engage the attention in such lighter works as "Minstrels," "General Lavine, Eccentric" and "Hommage à S. Pickwick, Esq." What is most often wanted and least often provided (in sufficient supply) is imaginative power, the kind of perception that reaches beyond the specifics of the printed page to those intangibles which cannot be conveyed by written symbols. There is very little of this in Pennario's tone and even less in the way in which it is put to the service of the music. The result is merely to downgrade whatever significance relates to the "Red Seal" as an index to quality.
Mozart: <i>Dances and Marches</i> (Vol. 4). Minuets (K. 103); March (K. 445); Contredanses (K. 535, 607, 609). Willy Boskovsky conducting the Vienna Mozart Ensemble. London CM 9459, \$4.79; stereo CS 6459, \$5.79.	The qualities of this issue are altogether consistent with its three predecessors: unfailingly agreeable, sometimes invigorating material, and consistently superior performances by Boskovsky and his companions of honor. That, to be sure, is a term customarily associated with English nobility, but it is no less applicable to the royal line of descent represented by the Vienna Philharmonic, of which they are all members. In this issue, the concentration of quality is, gratifyingly, toward the end of side two, with a climax in five contradanses derived from Figaro's "Non più andrai," then four-and-a-half years old. The instrumentation for flute, drum and strings adds a jaunty touch to the composer's far from sober reflections on his gay invention.
Mozart: Quintet in A (K. 581); Quartet (K. 370). Berlin Philharmonic Ensemble. Deutsche Grammophon 18 996, \$5.79; 138 996, \$5.79. Mozart: Quintet in A (K. 581). Weber: Quintet in B flat. Heinrich Geuser, clarinet, with the Drolc Quartet. Mace M9028, \$2.49; stereo SM9028, \$2.49.	Eminent work though it is, the performance of the Mozart Clarinet Quintet is not the primary attraction of either of these discs. Rather it is, in both instances, somewhat incidental to the second side. In the DGG issue, it is the highly adroit, remarkably controlled performance of the solo part of the Oboe Quartet by Lothar Klein, principal oboe of the Berlin Philharmonic; and in the Mace offering, it is a rare bit of virtuosity in the Weber which captures and holds the attention. Heinrich Geuser is not only a first-class instrumentalist, but one with a special feeling for the sound and mood appropriate to Weber's expressive, highly characteristic work. The partnership works well, for the members of the Drolc Quartet see the work in the same light as he does. If it is the Mozart Clarinet Quintet which is at issue, I would prefer their version to the Berliners, for the larger amount of personal impulse conveyed. In any case, the playing of Koch on DGG is a low-keyed but powerful incentive for acquiring that disc.
Schubert: Octet in F (Op. 166). Octet of the Berlin Philharmonic. Deutsche Grammophon 19 102, \$5.79; stereo 139 102, \$5.79.	Ultimates in music of this quality are hard to come by, but it may be said that the performance by Alfred Malacek and his associates is about as clean, rhythmically exact and pure in intonation as one could imagine. That, to be sure, is not the whole story of a successful performance of the Octet, but it puts this one in a category occupied by few others. What separates it from a place of its own in the literature of Schubert is a certain hardness of accent, a resistance to the kind of melting sound appropriate to the superheated ideas. And the horn could sound, certainly, more "golden" than it does performed upon by Gerd Seifert. The net of it all is the best possible performance of Schubert by Berliners—and that is about the only qualification that can be cited. Fine sound.
Schubert: Quartet in G, Op. 161. Amadeus Quartet. Deutsche Grammophon 19 103, \$5.79; stereo 139 103, \$5.79.	The Amadeus Quartet attains its access to the heart as well as the letter of this work by a natural extension of its known sympathies for Haydn and early Beethoven. Taken together, these are the shaping influences in Schubert's chamber music, and the two tributaries are united into a well-directed stream by leader Norbert Brainin. Unlike their previous venture with the <i>Death and the Maiden</i> Quartet, in which they were somewhat overmatched by the needs it poses for dramatic statement, they are concerned here with a work whose character throughout is lyric. It comes off with great credit to them and to the technicians who have reproduced their effort so well.

—I.K.

# The Verrett-Fasano "Orfeo"

**T**HERE COMES A TIME when an excessive show of antiquarianism plays hob with the music it tries to serve, and the musicologist's scalpel becomes the gravedigger's spade. No doubt RCA Victor, in engaging the Virtuosi di Roma as an instrumental body for its recording of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (LM 6169, \$14.37, stereo LSC-6169, \$17.37.), believed that, with the presence of players so sterling in the music of Vivaldi and Corelli, this new album of music by a genius of another age and background would come out a monument of authenticity. Certainly no pains have been spared to make it so. The Ricordi edition of *Orfeo* has been followed to the last dotted eighth-note. Not only are all of the repeats in the ballet music observed by the conductor, Renato Fasano, but also—in the long *da capo* passages—repeats within the repeats. At the same time, printed dynamic markings (presumably spurious) are dispensed with; and the orchestra, sounding strangely abstract, plays mezzo-forte by the meter. It is a pity that Gluck's wonderful opera emerges in this performance as a glassed-in museum piece.

Not only that. It lies in the wrong corridor. The score of *Orfeo ed Euridice*, composed by one historic non-conformist (Gluck) and edited, in the contralto version currently used, by another (Berlioz), bears no more than a wisp of relationship to the ornate concerti grossi of an earlier day in which the Virtuosi di Roma excel. *Orfeo* is a modern work, first heard in Vienna when the child Mozart was already concertizing and revised for Paris (by the composer) some four years after the birth of Beethoven. The libretto does retain—in the use of Greek mythology, the *deus ex machina*, and the finale full of ceremonial pomp—certain features of baroque opera, but these are only vestigial. The basic text of Raniero da Calzabigi—simple, direct and touching—is a far cry from the high-flown symmetry of Metastasio, that talkative imperial poet whose verses were sought so sedulously by court composers prior to Gluck. Calzabigi's libretto, uncomplicated on the surface, is actually a declaration of war against the smothering conventions of the old-fashioned *opera seria*. Gluck's music, too, strikes out on a revolutionary path, the way of free emotion. How else is one to account for the violent accents, the seething tonal drama of that scene in which Orfeo, not daring to look back, leads Euridice from the land of the dead? An over-all classi-

cal style, nobility of line, of course, but what geysers within! Those who have heard *Orfeo* in the theater, as conducted by Bruno Walter, or its second act in the recording by Arturo Toscanini know the vibrancy of this score, pedants to the contrary.

If the new recording of *Orfeo* generates little excitement, it does, however, radiate polish. The playing, *qua* playing, is fine-grained, tasteful, sometimes of a lovely consistency. Much of the dance music in the Elysian Fields carries charm. Yet even here an overly precise reading dries up the lyricism of the famous D-minor tune for flute (one recalls with what passion Georges Barrère would play this solo!). *Orfeo ed Euridice* is no relic. It remains, in our time, the oldest repertory piece, warmly active in the great opera houses of the world. The new recording has been well documented; the album liner contains excellent art work, informative historical notes. It is simply that the musical approach, so lofty by way of intent, has come out frozen.

The three vocal soloists fortunately provide a thaw. Following the Berlioz tradition of entrusting Orfeo to a mezzo-soprano (the role was created at the Vienna premiere by a castrato, Gaetano Guadagni), RCA Victor has cast Shirley Verrett as the minstrel with superb results. Miss Verrett has here discarded the AC-DC timbre which formerly placed her midway between soprano and mezzo in favor of a homogeneous, sculptured quality conveying the full grandeur of the music. It is her best performance thus far on records, and one that promises even more for the living theater.

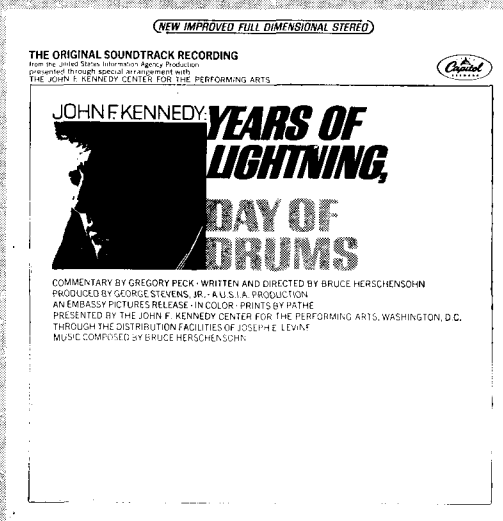
The chiseled tones of Anna Moffo are well suited to Euridice's classical line in the concerted numbers, and Miss Moffo, an adept stylist, brings good warmth and color to the last-act duet with Orfeo. (She also doubles successfully in the brief aria, "Questo asile di placide calme," assigned to the Happy Shade.) Completing the fine trio of principals is Judith Raskin as Amor, with a voice more rounded than one generally hears in the role . . . yet always in tune with its seraphic appeal.

In short, the disparity between cast and conductor is too great for comfort. No difference of technical address lies in question. Maestro Fasano and his men are distinguished musicians . . . but not of the theater.

—ROBERT LAWRENCE.

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