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The Star Spangled Keyboard

WHILE NOT EXACTLY a dime a dozen, American pianists—and brilliant virtuosi at that—exist in staggering numbers. Everyone is quick to admit that among them are some of the finest in the international current. But that we have produced an equally impressive amount of topnotch American piano music is hardly recognized. And no wonder, when so many of the finest and most publicized young pianists pursue their anachronistic careers oblivious to the creative surge about them. There are, of course, exceptions: David Tudor, Beveridge Webster, George Papastavrou, Leon Fleisher, William Masselos, and Robert Helps, to cite a few.

It is to the efforts of three of them that we owe a group of current recordings which both prove and belie the position of American creative skills. Some of the works are bona fide masterpieces while others, particularly among the smaller pieces, range from excellent to banal. But this new lot merely scratches the surface of a bulk of excellent American music awaiting discovery.

Webster has chosen three major works that are among the most important we have produced: Copland's *Piano Variations*, Sessions's *Second Sonata for Piano Solo*, and Elliott Carter's *Piano Sonata* (1945-46). Perhaps they will not seem to be immediately beguiling to those hearing them for the first time, but they wear well. Copland's *Variations*, dating from 1930, are based on a brief and rather restricting four-note motif. While confining himself, though not too rigidly, to this microcosmic theme, he ranges through a series of seventeen variations which, despite his skillful attempts at variety, tend toward the gloomy side.

Occupying a full side is Webster's brilliant and sympathetic performance of Elliott Carter's *Piano Sonata*. This is his second recording of this difficult and foreboding work. The first appeared in the early Fifties on a disc released by the American Recording Society. For nearly a decade and a half Webster has lived with and performed the *Sonata*, and his projection of it now is a marvel.

In this work, Carter attempted, he tells us, "to translate into a special virtuosic style my general musical outlook, my thoughts and feelings. I approached writing for the piano as if it were an art all of its own. . . ." He proceeds then to explore all manner of rhythmic ideas and pianistic devices. The second movement is in three sections: an Andante,

followed by a brilliant fugue, and then a concluding Andante whose measures are as poignant as many in the last sonatas of Beethoven.

Written in 1946—the same year as Carter's *Sonata*—was the *Second Sonata for Piano Solo* by Roger Sessions, a work conceived in the conventional three movements. The first is a busy Allegro con fuoco, fraught with a kind of Ivesian bustle. It is in the second movement that the work reveals a somewhat melancholy lyricism—though by no means as attractive, I find, as the uninhibited lyricism of Sessions's *First Piano Sonata* which dates from 1930. Sessions's earlier *Sonata* has been brilliantly recorded (CRI-198) by Robert Helps, who was Sessions's composition student, and hence approached his task with utmost sympathy.

This *First Sonata*, like that of Carter's, is, for all its intricacy, a work charged with a high poetic content. It was one of the first of his works that Sessions considered to embody his own developed personal style, with an opening that has all of the romantic allure of a Chopin nocturne (a rare quality among much of today's output).

On the companion side is a performance by Masselos of a sonata by William Mayer. Mayer may be a new name to many, but among his colleagues he is regarded as one of the very gifted writers of today. Although it is cast in a set of well defined movements, it is more in the nature of a fantasy than a conventional sonata. William Masselos's performance is stunning.

Webster and Masselos have both built substantial followings, but Robert Helps is as yet less known as a pianist. But this should not be for long. As a composer, he has had his *First Symphony* recently released on a Columbia disc. As a pianist, he has not only appeared with several major American orchestras but is represented on records in performances of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* and *The Book of the Hanging Gardens*; Milton Babbitt's *Du*, and Mel Powell's *Haiku*.

He was, for these as well as other reasons, a logical choice to record works by twenty-four contemporary composers on a two-disc set released by RCA Victor as *New Music for the Piano*. The genesis of this recording was the publication of a series of pieces selected and edited by Joseph Prostakoff. He was a disciple of the late Abby Whiteside, a

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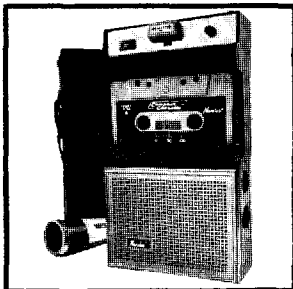
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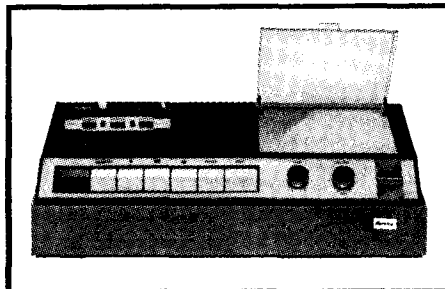
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pedagogue who also taught Robert Helps and several of the other composers represented.

It may seem peculiar that an organization enjoying the financial resources of RCA Victor should require a subsidy to record a series of American piano pieces, but such is the case; the issue was underwritten by the Abby Whiteside Foundation. The real discovery is pianist Robert Helps.

The music itself, with a few exceptions, is less rewarding, though two dozen pieces cover a considerable range. In an introductory booklet, Joseph Probstakoff observes that "compositional techniques have proliferated in the last two decades or so, particularly under the impact of the music of Arnold Schoenberg and his followers." Here the influence seems at times pejorative. As composers waded about in current twelve-tone academicism, one has the feeling that most of the works were leftovers in the composers' reticules. A few, however, are of the first order. Milton Babbitt has written a work called *Partitions* which breaks new musical ground and is worth the effort of investigation. The series contains a bright pianistic set of Fanfares by Ingolf Dahl; a set of finely constructed *Polarities No. 1* by Hall Overton; a Piano Suite by Miriam Gideon, which seems like excellent material for maturing young pianists; and a ricky-ticky bit of bewhiskered jazz by Sol Berkowitz. Things pick up decidedly with a *Nocturnal Interlude* by Paul Pisk and stay up with an interesting Etude by that pianistic whiz, Mel Powell. Two Rags and a *Blues* by Morton Gould add a little bit of lightweight interest.

An *Allegro on a Pakistan Lute Tone* is anything but mint Hovhanness; George Perle has constructed Six Preludes that meander dodecaphonically in an agreeable manner, as do the Two Preludes by composer-editor Probstakoff. A little diatonic gem emerges in an unpretentious *Prelude for a Pensive Pupil* by Peggy Glanville-Hicks. So innocent and tender among so many flinty efforts, it sings its melodic line warmly.

Who but a man named Bacon could write a piece called *The Pig Town Fling*? But that is just what Ernst Bacon did. It's a bit of quaint Americana that enjoyed its vogue in the late Thirties and slightly beyond.

Robert Helps's *Image*, which he plays with more than ordinary affection, is a vignette written with purpose. This is no throwaway. Instead, it is an uncommonly fine work. Six Bagatelles by Mark Brunswick are attractive and several of them, brief as they are, are among the most attractive writing of the lot. So, too, are the Two Bagatelles of Earl Kim. These brief pieces mark Kim as a provocative new talent.

—OLIVER DANIEL.



Please Dial Again

WALTER W. STRALEY, vice president for public relations of the American Telephone & Telegraph Company, was a phone company clerk in Des Moines in 1934. During that time he wrote a memo to the president of the local Bell System, criticizing the organization's "primitive public relations," an action which won him his first promotion. Last April, when he assumed his new duties in New York, his critical faculties were still operative. He examined the traditional *Bell Telephone Hour* on NBC Television, and decided that it was not doing a satisfactory PR job for AT&T.

The corporation's national advertising objective, primarily, is a favorable image among intellectuals—present and future opinion leaders and policy-makers, particularly at the college and university level. The approval of such people is important in the company's recruiting campaign for scientists and engineers. And the giant concentration of power and capital that is this corporation is increasingly subject to decisions made by intellectuals that may affect its destiny.

The way to get the company the image it seeks, Mr. Straley said in a recent conversation, is "to put on a program of serious music, because campus people, generally, like such music." Further, he said, he seeks "audience involvement in music-making." Instead of presenting concerts in television studios, the shows would go places, see musical "happenings," offer portraits of musical institutions and personalities in action. Straley's colleagues were not enthusiastic, but he overcame their "orderly resistance" and commissioned fifteen programs, of which, at this writing, three have been shown.

The new series is distinguished by the fact that commercials are placed only at the end of the programs, Nielsen ratings are not important: The sponsor would rather have "1,000,000 viewers watching intensely than 20,000,000 just watching." The renewal of the innovation for next season will depend on the approval of the campus community.

The first three shows haven't made it --precisely because of the lack of the special quality that launched Straley on his AT&T career—the critical view. The programs have all been public relations jobs for their subjects. In the world of music, it appears, everybody is a hero. Gian Carlo Menotti, in the first program, was paid a glowing tribute for bringing to fruition his dream of an arts festival

in Spoleto, Italy. Van Cliburn, in the second show, was seen triumphantly whirling from the National Music Camp, at Interlochen, Michigan, to a recording session in New York, to his old home town in Texas, and to the White House. Aaron Copland, Erich Leinsdorf, and other artists and students combined, in the third program, to sell the exhilarating atmosphere of Tanglewood.

Spoletto, Van Cliburn, and Tanglewood are all praiseworthy in many respects. But is Straley achieving his objective of "involving" viewers in the world of serious music? To take an audience "behind the scenes" is not necessarily to involve it. What matters is what is going on behind those scenes. Excerpts from rehearsals and performances may be enjoyable; opinions of artists may be interesting (as in Menotti's case) or they may be mere saccharine trivia (as in the case of Van Cliburn); or the observations of teachers and students may be sincere. A total program, notwithstanding, adds up to weighty dullness unless it is quickened by some revealing comment by the *maker* of a program about his material.

NO such comments illuminated the first three programs of the new *Bell Telephone Hour*. No critical appraisals were made; no tension of ideas or personalities disturbed the middle-brow, fan-magazine climate. The "musical documentaries" fell between the two chairs of *music* and *documentary*. A "short fuse" in the preparation of the programs may have contributed to the results. Straley's decision, last April, left little time for reflection by the producers, and editing schedules were frantic. This can be corrected by more lead time, but it is also necessary to involve critical intelligences who are experts in the world of music. Certain artists, of course, may refuse to participate in programs that reach for the perceptive, evaluative dimension, but surely enough can be found.

Puffery is not enough to attract the discerning campus community; neither are visual images of artists at work, if such images bring no surprises or unexpected meanings. This viewer hopes the public relations vice president will elect another round, for his innovation hasn't yet had a real chance. The new *Bell Telephone Hour* must begin to make statements about musicians that are worth paying attention to—or the opinion-makers will go back to their hi-fi sets.

—ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON.

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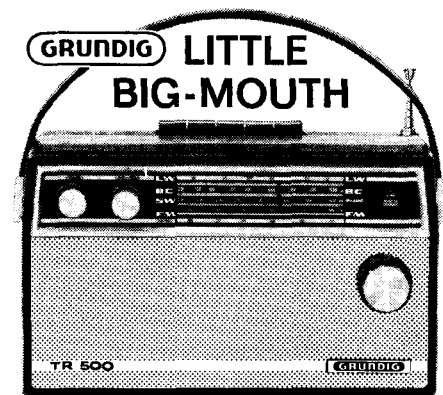
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