

The Met Family Robinson

TO IDENTIFY the shepherd of this incomparable flock as Francis Robinson, assistant manager of the Metropolitan (and as his colleague John Gutman refers to him, "Caruso's living representative on earth") is to answer the first question that arises in contemplating its composition: What discrimination has been exercised in collating its content? For, out of the mass of material that presents itself, Robinson has moved with constant discrimination and almost infallible good judgment in documenting the somewhat specious premise in which the collection is based—the "Opening Nights" of the eighty-three years in which the Metropolitan company occupied its first home on Broadway. Even the inclusion with each album of a bit of the Met's True Cross—the "great gold curtain"—does not erase the recollection that opening nights are, more often than not, memorable for things other than great vocal art.

But rarely has a questionable premise given rise to so splendid a result. It is, with the exception of two or three dubious choices, probably the greatest collection of operatic artistry ever brought together in a single issue. In each case, the reason for the disputed selection is obvious: What Metropolitan album would be complete without Flagstad and Melchior in a *Tristan* excerpt, or Pinza as Boris? But the ill-starred venture with Edwin McArthur and the San Francisco Opera Orchestra (made in Hollywood) with its inappropriate ending on an interpolated C-major chord hardly answers that need. As for the *Boris* excerpt which emanates from the same source, it is one of the very few of thirty items that does not show its proponents in the prime of vocal form, as fine as it is otherwise.

That, of course, is one of the great joys of such a venture as this: to erase the last memory of some beloved artist—too often, one tinged with regret that the career ended too late, rather than too soon—and restore the sound to the estate that made it beloved. In a rare instance, the length of service has nothing to do with an inimitable outcome: Listening to the Rethberg-De Luca duet from *Aida* one is inclined to wonder whether an Amonasro has ever sung the great phrase "Pensa che un popolo vinto, straziato" any better, though his Metropolitan debut was then (1930) fifteen years behind him, and he had been an Italian celebrity for a dozen years before.

As is apt to be the case with collections that must be comprehensive as well as selective, some of the choices are so inevitable that they are indispensable "classics," meaning they have been reproduced in many other collections (the *Rigoletto* quartet, for example, or Caruso's "Rachel! quand du Seigneur," but

Robinson has courted us, in compensation, with a bit of Farrar's *Tosca* that has never before been issued, and put back into circulation a memorable example of Tibbett's artistry as Boccanegra, a great ensemble from *Samson*, with Caruso, Homer, and Journet, a long-deleted *Rosenkavalier* duo directed by Reiner, etc.

And, out of his embracing knowledge of this particular subject, he has put together a series of vignettes of the opening nights represented by each of the selections that are as entertaining as they are informative. What will the yield be from the next eighty-three years? Not, probably, of the same caliber.

—IRVING KOLODIN.

Opening Nights at the Metropolitan

GOUNOD: "Le Roi de Thulé" (*Faust*) Emma Eames, soprano. "Ah! je ris", Nellie Melba, soprano. "Je veux vivre dans ce rêve" (*Roméo et Juliet*) Eames, soprano.

VERDI: "Credo" (*Otello*) Antonio Scotti, baritone. "Non pensateci più," "Ora e per sempre addio." Giovanni Martinelli, tenor, and Lawrence Tibbett, baritone. "Niun mi tema." Ramon Vinay, tenor, with Arturo Toscanini conducting. "Bella figlia dell'amore" (*Rigoletto*) Enrico Caruso, tenor; Marcella Sembrich, soprano; Antonio Scotti, baritone; and Gina Severina, mezzo-soprano. "O patria mia" (*Aida*) Emmy Destinn, soprano. Temple Scene. Ezio Pinza, bass; Martinelli, tenor; and Grace Anthony, soprano. "Ciel! mio padre," "Su, dunque." Elisabeth Rethberg, soprano, and Giuseppe De Luca, baritone. "Ritorna vincitor." Zinka Milanov, soprano. "Dite alla giovine," "Imponete" (*La Traviata*) Amelita Galli-Curci, soprano, and De Luca, baritone. "Folle! Folle!" "Sempre Libera". Lucrezia Bori, soprano. "Plebe, Patrizi," "Piango su voi" (*Simon Boccanegra*) Tibbett, baritone; Rose Bampton, soprano; Martinelli, tenor; Robert Nicholson, bass; and Leonard Warren, baritone. "Forse la soglia attinse," "Ma se m'è forza perderti" (*Ballo in Maschera*) Jan Peerce, tenor. "Quel pallor" (*Don Carlo*) Jussi Björling, tenor, and Robert Merrill, baritone. "Il Balen del suo sorriso" (*Il Trovatore*) Warren, baritone, and Nicola Moscona, bass.

PONCHIELLI: "Stella del marinar" (*La Gioconda*) Louise Homer, mezzo-soprano. "Suicidio." Rosa Ponselle, soprano.

SAINT-SAËNS: "Je viens célébrer la victoire" (*Samson et Dalila*) Caruso, tenor; Homer, mezzo-soprano; and Marcel Journet, bass.

PUCCINI: "Ora stammi a sentir," "Stasera canto" (*Tosca*) Geraldine Farrar, soprano. "Vissi d'arte." Maria Jeritza, soprano.

HALEVY: "Rachel! quand du Seigneur" (*La Juive*) Caruso, tenor.

WAGNER: "Doch der Tag muss Tristan wecken?" "So stürben wir" (*Tristan und Isolde*) Kirsten Flagstad, soprano, and Lauritz Melchior, tenor, with Edwin McArthur conducting the San Francisco Opera Orchestra. "Euch lüften" (*Lohengrin*) Helen Traubel, soprano.

MOZART: "Deh vieni, non tardar." (*Le Nozze di Figaro*) Bidu Sayão, soprano.

MOUSSORGSKY: Death Scene (*Boris Godounov*) Ezio Pinza, bass, with the 20th Century-Fox Orchestra, Alfred Newman conducting.

DELIBES: "Où va la jeune indoue," "Là-bas dans la forêt" (*Lakmé*) Lily Pons, soprano.

STRAUSS: "Mir ist die Ehre," "Ist Zeit und Ewigkeit" (*Der Rosenkavalier*) Risë Stevens, mezzo-soprano, and Erna Berger, soprano, with Fritz Reiner conducting.

ROSSINI: "Alfine, eccoci qua," "Zitti, zitti" (*Il Barbiere di Siviglia*) Roberta Peters, soprano; Cesare Valletti, tenor; and Merrill, baritone, with Erich Leinsdorf conducting.

—RCA Victor LM 6171, \$15.00.

RECORDINGS REPORTS I: Orchestral LPs

WORK, PERFORMER, DATA

REPORT

Bartók: Concerto for Orchestra. Herbert von Karajan, with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Deutsche Grammophon 39003, \$5.79; stereo, 139003, \$5.79.

This is, of course, not the first Karajan version of this remarkable work (one, it may be mentioned, which stands up to its accumulation of performances with interest undiminished and artistic values unimpaired). But as the required time has now elapsed to permit von Karajan to replace his prior version with the Philharmonia Orchestra on Angel, it is a version with some ten years accumulation of experience that results in a treatment much more subtle and imaginative than its predecessor. Unlike some other performances by Karajan that suggest he is trying to recast a work in his own spirit, this performance clearly defines his ability to shape his own inclinations to the spirit of a work in which he is sufficiently interested. It is a more probing, concentrated, and detailed examination of Bartók's intentions than is commonly heard, with less reliance on the externals of the work. These are sufficiently diverse to assure success for a mere orderly rendering of them, but what lies behind has seldom been revealed so completely as it is by Karajan. The fine orchestra has rarely sounded better, and the reproduction of it adds another to the lengthy list of DGG triumphs.

Dussek: Concerto in B flat, Op. 63. Michael and Anna Galperin, pianists, with Adolphe Schwartz conducting the Pro Musica Orchestra. Baroque 1867, \$4.79; stereo 2867, \$5.79.

Regrettable, indeed, it is that this issue cannot be auditioned for the enjoyment of James Hunecker's "Old Fogey," who, according to his creator, "adored the slightly banal compositions of the worthy Dussek" and "named his little villa on the Wissahickon Creek after Dussek." I cite all of Hunecker's humorous evaluation, for it still stands as a sound estimate of how Dussek's creations rate. But it is a sign of progress (Hunecker's essays, first published in *Etude Magazine*, were published as a volume in 1913) that today's music lover can judge for himself what Jan Ladislav Dussek's proper rating is, and not be dependent on hearsay. This effort of Galperin will win no *Prix*s, Grand or otherwise, either for interpretation or reproduction (sometimes it sounds as though four pianists were at work rather than merely the listed two), but it does amplify a couple of previous issues to establish Dussek—born a few years after Mozart, died a few years after Haydn—as an interesting offshoot of both. Fluent and spirited, it also tends to rattle along as if the spirit as well as the fluency were in the fingers rather than the mind.

Dvořák: Symphony No. 4 in G. Herbert von Karajan conducting the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. London CM 9443, \$4.79; stereo CS 6443, \$5.79.

It took the geniality and warmth of the late Bruno Walter to reveal this work to the world at large in a memorable recording of the early Fifties. This, by definition, puts a perimeter around the extent to which Karajan can penetrate to its substance, for his angular, insistent treatment is tangential rather than direct. This is particularly true of the great final variation movement (one of the best sustained stretches of writing Dvořák ever achieved, if not the best) which, as rebuilt by Karajan, is lacking both charm and humor. Indeed, if one did not accept the label attribution as indisputable, one might imagine it was the work of the Berlin, rather than the Vienna, Philharmonic. Fine reproduction.

Handel: *Water Music*. August Wenzinger conducting the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis. Archive 73265, stereo only, \$5.79. Pierre Boulez conducting the Hague Philharmonic Orchestra. Nonesuch H-1127, \$2.50; stereo, H-71127, \$2.50.

Though Wenzinger does not enjoy as lustrous a reputation as a conductor as does Boulez, he more than holds his own in this particular repertory. This is not so much by virtue of his distinction as it is because of Boulez's uneven response to the problem in hand. Some of the slow sections in the Boulez version benefit from his superior insight, but the fast sections tend to be rushed. However, as neither orchestra is of the first quality, the best all 'round version of this masterly succession of dance movements remains Rafael Kubelik's with the Berlin Philharmonic (DGG 138799).

Khrennikov: Concerto. Mozart: Concerto in G (K. 216). Leonid Kogan, violin, with the Leningrad Philharmonic conducted by Kurt Sanderling. Baroque 1866, \$4.79; stereo, 2866, \$5.79.

To such Americans as might be familiar with his name, Khrennikov is less identifiable, musically, than such other contemporary K's of the Soviet Union as Khachaturian and Kabalevsky. Indeed, he is most likely to be associated with "party line" statements in his capacity of Secretary General of the Union of Soviet Composers. However, this work (unidentified as to date, and not provided with an opus number) shows a very considerable command of compositional craft, and is especially well written for its solo instrument. The idiom is tinged with overtones of Prokofiev, but moves away in an individual manner as the work unfolds. Kogan plays it as though it might have been written for him, achieving a thoroughgoing totality with the excellent orchestra under Sanderling's direction. As he has demonstrated on prior occasions, Kogan's silky sound and cultivated style are admirably suited to Mozart. The orchestra is somewhat heavier than desirable (especially in the low strings), but it is, on the whole, polished Mozart that they accomplish together.

Schubert: Symphony No. 5 in B flat. Mozart: Symphony in G minor (No. 40). Rudolf Barshai conducting the Moscow Chamber Orchestra. Angel 36371, \$4.79; stereo, S 36371, \$5.79.

Unlike some prior productions of it on records, Barshai's treatment of the beguiling Schubert B flat is very much in the character of *hausmusik*. That is to say, the total complement of players is limited in numbers, the flute part soars out easily above the rest because it does not have files of string players to outproduce. In short, it sounds much as it might have when Schubert heard it in Vienna at Otto Hartwig's in 1816 (aged nineteen). Fortunately, too, the performance is very much of the "consensus" order—which is to say, what a group of musicians might arrive at on their own, without the intercession of a "name" conductor. The spirit of fitness prevails through the four movements, which means that it is consistently pleasurable listening. However, not quite so much can be said for the Mozart G minor. Technically, it is no less good, but interpretatively it demands more drive, mood, and intensity than Barshai provides. Both works are noted as recorded in France, with its expectable gain in quality on the previous recordings of the ensemble from its native country.

Tchaikovsky: *Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake* (excerpts). Leopold Stokowski conducting the New Philharmonia Orchestra. London SPC 21008, stereo only, \$5.79.

Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* music has long rated as one of Stokowski's best "productions," and this one is, if anything, broader, more spacious and brighter in sound than its predecessors. For this, the virtues of London's "Phase 4" techniques are at least partially to be credited. As almost tends to be the case with Stokowski, however, the sequence is not without its vagaries, especially for those who have some picture in mind of the action that accompanies certain episodes of the dance action. Of course, the rejoinder can be that this is as a "concert treatment," without relation to the balletic values. (Especially at the end of No. 8, where a speed-up is introduced for "effect.") The *Swan Lake* is equally good at its best, and its best prevails from start to finish. Tonally, this is orchestral playing of outstanding quality.

—IRVING KOLODIN.