

Six by Chávez

By OLIVER DANIEL

WHEN the music of Carlos Chávez was first heard in the United States back in the Thirties it created quite a stir. But the noise he made was not exactly a joyful one, nor was it wildly cacophonous—Varèse, Riegger, and Ives were taking care of that department. What was most exciting in Chávez was a surcharge of energy; even the title of the first of his major works heard here echoed it. This was *H. P.* (for Horse Power) and it was given its American premiere by Leopold Stokowski in a full ballet production with the Philadelphia Orchestra. A fragment had been heard earlier in New York in 1924 in a concert conducted by Eugene Goossens and sponsored by the International Composers' Guild (an organization dreamed up by Varèse himself). In *H. P.*, Chávez wrote music that was virile, compelling, and original, and, while sharing kinship with Stravinsky's *Sacre*, its primitivism was more elemental.

In 1936, both Koussevitzky and Stokowski invited him to conduct their respective orchestras, and the following season he conducted the New York Philharmonic. In all of these programs he introduced works of his own, and two—his *Sinfonia India* and his *Sinfonia de Antígona*—helped both to establish and to maintain his reputation as a major twentieth-century figure. Both of these are included in a set of six symphonies issued by Columbia, with Chávez conducting the Orquesta Sinfónica de México, or OSM, as it is conveniently abbreviated. These six symphonies span thirty-two years of Chávez's creative life, and the recording is a deserved tribute. The orchestra was originally developed by Chávez and conducted by him for more than a decade, during which he presented programs that were more adventurous than those of most of his colleagues.

In the 1940s I spent several summers in Mexico and was able to hear Chávez conduct programs with his orchestra. On rereading some reviews which I wrote at the time, I am pleasantly reminded of the striking quality of these concerts. Not only did Chávez play many of his own works, but he introduced those of his colleagues: Jose Rolon, Manuel Ponce, Silvestre Revueltas, Daniel Ayala, Candelario Huizar, Pablo Moncayo, and the very young and gifted Blas Galindo.

Only one of these rivaled Chávez, and that was the superabundantly gifted Revueltas who regrettably lost himself in dipsomaniacal disintegration and died in 1940. If Chávez's innate gift was less, he used and developed it to greater advantage and became the most arresting musical figure Mexico has produced.

Sinfonia de Antígona, Chávez's first, is drawn from incidental music which he composed in 1932 for a performance of Jean Cocteau's version of *Antigone*. In it he skillfully welded the feeling of an ancient Greece with that of primitive Mexico. It is a masterpiece of orchestral color in a stark, nonopulent way.

Sinfonia India is one of Chávez's finest works and, after three decades, still remains as fresh as it was when he introduced it. It is a rugged, powerful, driving work that gains some of its sense of vigor by its abrupt contrasts between dynamic and tranquil juxtapositions. He uses some hauntingly beautiful Mexican tunes from the state of Sonora that add a particular loveliness.

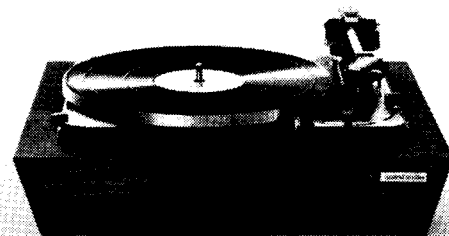
Both of these works have been recorded several times, and the present one is a fine, rich-sounding one. I still hanker for the earliest, done about 1940. It had a flatter sound and made the tones come out like primary colors. As I observed, opulence is not germane to



—BMI Photo.

Carlos Chávez — "virile, compelling, and original."

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these four elemental works. The *secco* quality is one I prefer for this music, and "dry" as in martini is equally desirable here.

In 1951, Chávez began work on his Third Symphony on commission from Clare Boothe Luce in memory of her daughter. It is a major work and a long one, over which he labored until 1954, when it was completed. Here Chávez wrestled with the problem of identity. He abandoned his reliance on ethnic materials and sought that which was pure Chávez. So strong was his affinity for native elements that I find them intruding almost slyly. Herbert Weinstock notes that Chávez's family was predominantly Criollo—Spanish with a tincture of Indian blood. While this may describe the capillary count, it does not assess the spiritual. To me, it is the Indian in Chávez that makes him unique. The Third Symphony is filled with interesting ideas that burst out with his characteristic impetuosity.

Both Chávez's Fourth and Fifth Symphonies were written while he was at work on his Third, and, along with his Sixth, they are more sophisticated works. But in his case eclecticism became pejorative. None of these last three equal the freshness and verve of the preceding ones or of his *Xochipilli* ("An Imagined Aztec Music"), also recorded by Columbia.

His Symphony No. 4 (*Sinfonia Romantica*) was commissioned by the Louisville Orchestra and was given its first Kentucky performance in 1953, conducted by the composer. It is a three-movement work: slow—fast—slow. As a conductor, Chávez was never at his best in the works of romantic composers, nor is he at his best in a work of romantic intent. While it is very well written and has many fine moments, it leans toward the academic and conventional.

The Symphony No. 5 for Strings was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation and was composed during the summer of 1953. This is a broad symphonic work and not an amplified string quartet, and it calls to mind the Symphonic Suite for Strings of Lou Harrison. Here Chávez's strong individuality threads itself through buckets of notes of mostly small denomination and, despite flashes of melodic brilliance, it often lapses into busy-busy, motoric repetition. The strings of Chávez's orchestra exhibit some peculiar ideas of pitch and add some microtonal quality that Chávez never intended.

The last work, Symphony No. 6, is the longest and most ambitious. All of the good things that one finds in Chávez's work are here, but somehow they do not add up as impressively. The Symphony was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic for the opening season of Lincoln Center.

Wild Bill

Continued from page 69

the players of which are not specified, with the exception of a violinist named Mac Ceppos on the track of "Just A Gigolo." The LP is well worth finding; it is—I say this with all the sincerity I can muster—one of the greatest jazz records of our time.

What makes it so, I hardly could define. Bill plays, among other things, "Mandy, Make up Your Mind," the old Ellington song called "Black Butterfly," "A Ghost of a Chance," "Blue Again," and, best of all, "When Your Lover Has Gone." (Eddie Condon used to introduce this by saying, "Wild Bull will now do several choruses of a tune dedicated to his constitution, entitled 'When Your Liver Has Gone.'" This made everybody laugh—except Davison.)

The man does not have much sense of humor about the world or himself. He is as dedicated to his music as Bix was, as Rex Stewart is, and goes up against every solo as though it were a physical contest. As I write this he is living in Los Angeles, wishing he were back in New York. The climate Out There does not suit him. It is too bland; it does not test him the way the changing seasons in the East do. At last he is happily married to a woman who looks after him well (he was married four times before, never for long periods of time). In the former Anne Hendlin he has found someone who, for thirteen years, has understood his needs and exasperations, those natural concomitants of the creative state.

Anne looks after Bill solicitously, and treats him as though he were a small boy. For a period, he appeared to be afflicted with kleptomania. One night, in George Melly's house in London, I had to restrain him from making off with a couple of leather-bound antique books, a cigarette box, and a porcelain phrenologist's head. "Where is Wild Bill?" Mick Mulligan asked Eddie Condon one day when we all were sitting around in Eddie's room drinking Ernie Anderson's booze. Without hesitation, Condon said, "Why, I believe Bull is out trying to unscrew Big Ben."

Quite a lady, Lady Anne, to cope with such a roaring urchin spirit. But the possessor of the latter is quite a man, as well. The Wild Bull never has been anything but his own man. There never has been a note he has not gone for, and usually made; there never has been a cadenza he has not essayed. Always, on the stand, he has tried to be at his best, whether sober, drunk, or bored. He is one of the best musicians in the whole jazz business, and let us now praise the Lord that, at sixty, he still is going strong and making us all happier about our lot.

—RICHARD GEHMAN.

FILED BUT NOT FORGOTTEN



—Lotte Jacobi.

1947—Peter Pears (left) and Benjamin Britten during their first American tour. They return for a second in September.



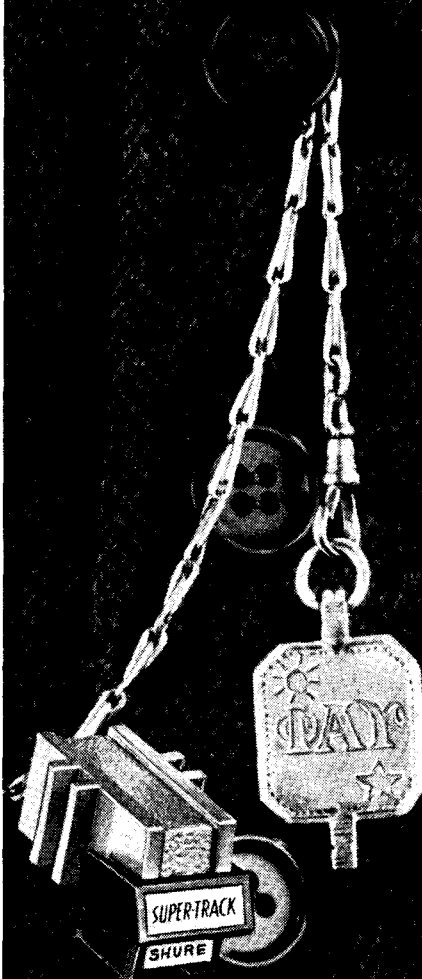
1958—Van Cliburn, visiting in Moscow, is entertained by David Oistrakh (left), an interpreter, and Sviatoslav Richter.



—Marshall W. Stearns.

1956—Dizzy Gillespie and vocalist Dottie Saulters entertain natives of Dacca, East Pakistan, during State Department tour. At rear center, trombonist Melba Liston.

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