

RECORDINGS REPORTS II: Miscellaneous LPs

WORK, PERFORMER, DATA

REPORT

Beethoven: Quartets, Op. 18. Hungarian Quartet. Seraphim stereo, SIC 6005, \$2.49; mono, IC 6005, \$2.49.

The presumption from the imprint "newly recorded" is that this is not a reissue of material previously on Angel (or an affiliated label) but a creation for the present purpose of a "budget" issue. As such it is a model of chamber-music sound, and as such can be recommended without qualification. It is also a first-class example of chamber-music playing—crisp, clean, and with a total integration of values. However, it is the kind of chamber-music playing in which the performers sound to be more engaged with their own interests and reactions than they are in conveying Beethoven's purposes to a listener. Or, perhaps, it is merely that they take as gospel the premise that the Beethoven of the Opus 18 quartets is a "classicist" and as such should not be emotionalized. The indications of such a quartet as the C-minor are, of course, quite otherwise. These are, then, clear, well articulated performances lacking in the depth and fervor the music contains.

Beethoven: Variations (*Eroica*). Op. 35. Liszt: *Dante Sonata*; *Rakóczy March*. David Bar-Illan, piano. RCA Victor stereo, LSC 2943, \$5.79; mono, LM 2943, \$4.79.

One unmistakable fact emerges from this recording rather more prominently than from Bar-Illan's performances in the concert hall: He is an artistic "somebody," an individual of recognizable impulses and objectives rather than another of the highly mechanized keyboard manipulators who come and go. This is not to say that what he does with the Beethoven Variations is exactly what I would wish to hear, or that his Liszt is all-persuasive. But certainly Bar-Illan earns the right to his own point of view with the strong sense of identity with each composer that he projects. The articulation of Beethoven is a little light and dry to my way of hearing, but contrapuntal values in the Variations are set forth with precision and a fine sense of relative values. Here, as in the Liszt, the quality of piano sound may be related to the kind of piano utilized. It is, contrary to most precedents, specifically identified as the "new Baldwin concert grand SD-10." The over-bright, none-too-resonant quality does not impress me as the ideal advertisement for the instrument, old or new.

Brahms: Sonatas, Op. 120 (Nos. 1 and 2). Walter Trampler, viola; with Mieczyslaw Horszowski, piano. RCA Victor stereo, LSC 2933, \$5.79; mono, LM 2933, \$4.79.

Either in this form, or in their alternate guise as sonatas for clarinet and piano, these works have more of the sere and yellow than the golden glow associated with autumn (Brahms was not all that old when in 1894, aged sixty-two, he put this music on paper, but he had only a few years to live and may already have been suffering from the ailment that brought about his death). They are rather more measured, rhythmically, and not as vital, melodically, as Brahms at his best, or even second best. This is mentioned merely to stress the problem that is confronted by a pair of interpreters. Trampler and Horszowski are two of the best who have addressed themselves to the task, and they work productively, especially at No. 2, the more attractive of the pair. Good blend of sounds.

Chopin: Ballades. Ivan Moravec, piano. Connoisseur Society stereo, CS 1266, \$5.79; mono, CM 1266, \$4.79.

These performances come closer to justifying Connoisseur's extensive, almost exclusive, attentions on Moravec's behalf as an interpreter of Chopin. There is a strain of moody poetry in the introductory section of the G-minor, and a strong current of lyric feeling where it is appropriate elsewhere. However, there is seldom a grand climax on the scale appropriate to Chopin's expression, nor is bass resonance to supply the overtones for the chords and arpeggios above it present in the order of strength desired. On the whole, Moravec continues to impress as a performer better endowed with fluency than he is either with pianistic power or strength of personality.

Janáček: Quartets Nos. 1 and 2. Smetana Quartet. Parliament stereo, PLPS 626, \$2.98; mono, PLP 626, \$1.98.

The beautiful and long admired quartet called *Secret Pages* has been available in a version by the Smetana Quartet for some time (in combination with No. 3), but its predecessor is something more of a rarity. It is the one which originated with Tolstoi's *Kreutzer Sonata* and is permeated with the tidal emotions that flow from its source. It is also marked by the freedom of formal impulse which, to some who heard the music when it was new, was equated with a lack of technical discipline. However, it is quite clear from the inner relationship of elements that it was done just as the composer intended. Both performances are infused with the warm feelings and beautiful impulses latent in the works, which the Smetana ensemble (Jiri Novak, Lubomir Kostecky, Jaroslav Rybensky, Antonin Kohut) is ideally equipped to realize. The sound is very satisfactory.

Mendelssohn: Quartet in A minor, Op. 13. Grieg: Quartet in G minor, Op. 27. Guarneri Quartet. RCA Victor stereo, LSC 2948, \$5.79; mono, LM 2948, \$4.79.

The series of Guarneri Quartet releases and the evidence that there are more to come add to conviction that it is coming close to the top quality of native quartets long represented exclusively by the Juilliard ensemble (much the same could be said of the repertory so far projected by the Beaux Arts). Gratifyingly, too, it is establishing a character—impulsive, emotionally motivated, unaffected by inhibitions related to technical considerations—which will make for a place of its own, regardless of competitive pressures. These two performances are full of these strongly marked inclinations, plus the independence of mind to seek out works which might be regarded as not among the most "important" in the literature. Arnold Steinhardt and his associates measure up to the tasks set for them, which, with such composers as Mendelssohn and Grieg, is sufficient guarantee of important results. Fine sound.

Rimsky-Korsakov: *Mlada* (excerpts). Yevgeny Svetlanov conducting the chorus and orchestra of the Moscow Radio; with Anatoly Blagov, bass; Aleksei Bolshakov, baritone; Vladimir Makhov, tenor; Nina Kulagina, mezzo; Tatiana Tugarinova, soprano; and Aleksei Korolyev, bass. Melodiya-Angel stereo, ST 40012, \$5.79; mono, T 40012, \$4.79.

On the surface—or the two of them—this would seem the kind of thing that the affiliation of Melodiya in the U.S.S.R. and Capitol in this country could produce to advantage. That would be to process substantial portions of Russian "classics" not too well known in this country. However, it is dulling the edge to offer a performance by the Moscow Radio rather than a representative opera company, and the excerpts are more considerably orchestral than would seem desirable. They are identified as: "Procession of the Nobles," "The Divination," and "Kolo" (all from Act II); "Night on Triglav Mountain and Fantastic Kolo," "Witches' Sabbath and Infernal Kolo" (from Act III); "Morena's Curse," "Destruction of Retra," and Closing Scene (Act IV). Musically, the interests vary from Rimsky's carry-over of his absorption with the *Ring* in the 1890s to the kind of *grotesquerie* which turned into Stravinsky's Katschei not too many years later. Some of the best of the music verges on the color content of *Coq d'Or*, but that kind of masterful expression would take Rimsky another dozen years to realize fully. Very good sound.

—I.K.

The London "Faust"

THE NEW London *Faust* (stereo, OSA 1433, \$23.19; mono, A 4433, \$19.19) is a schizophrenic enterprise that offers lofty heights and deep lows; brings new respect for its conductor, Richard Bonyng, and his Marguerite, Joan Sutherland; raises fresh reservations about the famous London sonics. Orchestral texture and volume fluctuate whimsically. Instruments intertwine with, rather than support, the voices. And the symphonic postludes have been revved up rather than intensified. I am thinking of the spread-eagle crescendo that spans the closing measures of Act I (the duo for Faust and the Devil) and, with more aversion, of those final bars in the "Walpurgisnacht" where orchestral tone gives way to canned uproar—carrying one back to the 1930s, to the lounge of any neighborhood movie house from whose depths it was possible to tell, through a noisy stepping up of the sound track inside, when the feature picture had ended and the newsreel begun.

This business of sonics brings grave questions in its wake. How is one to appraise the conductor's grasp of orchestral balance and color when so much command seems to have come from behind the glass panel? Tempo, precision, musicality of phrase, coordination with the singers are the remaining criteria—and on these counts Richard Bonyng, who has developed in his skills, wins hands down. He has a flair for the "just" tempo, avoids clichés favored by older conductors, has restudied the score with respect and imagination. It would be interesting to hear him in a performance less rigorously monitored. Even here he impresses by mastery of pacing, alertness to the dramatic and vocal requirements. The London Symphony, it should be added, plays expertly.

In a fusion of flamboyant sound and solid research, the new album brings us Gounod's opera uncut. We are the gainers, for there is much of value in these pages ordinarily passed over in the opera house. A recent revival of *Faust* at the Metropolitan restored the fourth-act aria of Marguerite, unfamiliar to most listeners: "Il ne revient pas." This recording adds the air of Siébel that follows, "Si le bonheur à sourire t'invite," along with several other "bit" phrases for the youth (mezzo-soprano). At least one of them, preceding the return of the soldiers, throws new light architecturally on the street scene.

Moreover, Margreta Elkins, the Siébel, is sensitive and admirable, quite the best singer of this role in my experience. Her French is less than perfect, but of how many performers has this not been said?

Another restoration of practically unknown material takes place in the prison scene during the interchange ("Oui, c'est toi, je t'aime") between Marguerite and Faust. This comes off less successfully, since it renders static the action and musical flow at a moment when—for best effect—they should move forward. And the Church Scene has been placed *after* the death of Valentin, rather than before—a change all to the good, sharpening the sense of architectural destination. It should be noted that this scene, magnificently performed, provides the one point at which the album's controversial sonics not only work but communicate. A cavernous Gothic building is evoked, a vast and shadowy nave that ought justifiably to fill Marguerite with dread.

As for the cast, it is a case of mixed pickles—headliners all, but not really blended. I have already mentioned Miss Elkins as a fine Siébel, a secondary part done with artistry. Of the major roles, Miss Sutherland's Marguerite is outstanding—touchingly conceived, well sustained, beautifully sung. From start to finish, the soprano's sights are on

dramma per musica. Her virtuosity, her gleaming sound are at the service of this score as theater. Granted, the articulation of words is not always ideal, the atmosphere she creates is strong—even haunting. For once we have a "Jewel Song" that conveys true innocence of heart. Musically, too, it is unblemished. And I am glad that she interpolated that traditional C (not written in the score and primly banned from recent New York performances) at the end of the garden scene. It brings an enormous sense of climax. Her Church Scene is excellent, and much of the prison madness is affecting. Needless to say, the final trio—as sung by Miss Sutherland, Franco Corelli, and Nicolai Ghiaurov, with all the sluices open—is exciting.

Mr. Ghiaurov, the Méphistophélès, sings nobly. He never forces, never descends to caricature (a pitfall of this role); but neither does he achieve much in the way of nuance. His most effective singing may be heard in the Classical Sabbath, where mastery of line and lyrical phrasing serve him well. The French is spotty but serviceable; and if he does not overwhelm dramatically, perhaps the lack stems from a modern player's aversion to the trappings of this gaudy part.

Ironically, the least satisfactory performance is by a Parisian: the baritone Robert Massard, as Valentin. His enunciation is clear, his pitch dead-center—but there is a lack of involvement, a failure to characterize or to color which, in the end, brings less of value to the listener than the frequently overwrought yet always vital singing of Franco Corelli as Faust.

Just as the maestro, on this recording,



—Neal Barr/Angus McBean.

(Left to right) Franco Corelli, Joan Sutherland, Nicolai Ghiaurov—"headliners all, but not really blended."