

A Guide to Russcol's "Guide"

It has been a long time since anyone has attempted a book evaluating all, or substantially all, current recordings of serious music, though there have been recent volumes limited to coverage of a single composer or a certain period (as well as compilations from the pages of *High Fidelity*). The latest effort, however, is restricted not in terms of repertory but of price—as indicated in the title of Herbert Russcol's *Guide to Low-Priced Classical Records* (Hart, 832 pages, \$10 hardcover, \$2.95 paperback).

Mr. Russcol, identified as a horn player, author of two other books, and contributor to several periodicals, has attempted to write the kind of book that simply cannot be written any more: There are too many records, too many new ones every month (the cover of the October *Schwann Catalog* announced "674 new listings"), and too many being deleted for such a book to be by the time it is published really comprehensive and up-to-date. Acknowledging this, one would like to be able to salute Russcol for a valiant effort, but after reading only a few pages one becomes painfully aware of a distressing combination of omission, carelessness, and something less than full familiarity with the subject.

One is put off, at the start, by references to "Virgil Thomas," "Irving Colodan," an opera composer named "Zandoni," a Mozart opera character named "Petrillo," and the "50 to 10,000 cycles-per-second hi-fi bug." Leaving aside such niceties as the validity of Russcol's critical judgment ("Rosbaud seems ill-at-ease conducting Bruckner," for example; or the list of "Great Works of Western Music" in which the Vaughan Williams symphonies are represented only by Nos. 2 and 8; or the "Basic Repertory" list that includes only a single Mozart concerto and no Mozart quartet) and his crude, cliché-ridden language ("untold millions" listen to Beethoven, while Giulini is "noted almost exclusively for his opera conduction"), one finds his book an unreliable guide because of its innumerable inaccuracies regarding what is on the records discussed, as well as what is and is not available on low-priced discs.

Such a book cannot be produced overnight; one can only imagine how much time must have gone into it—but

not enough, evidently, for the author to hear all the records he discusses. "Horenstein's direction is lively, but the playing is indifferent" is the comment on a Vox recording of Ravel's *Pavane pour une infante défunte*. But Horenstein has not recorded the *Pavane*. On the record in question the work is given in its original form as a piano solo, played by Vlado Perlemuter, for whom Horenstein conducts the orchestra in the two Ravel concertos.

Also in the Ravel section, both the Munch/Victrola and the Ansermet/Richmond records of *Daphnis et Chloé* are listed as the "complete ballet," but the Victrola actually offers only the two concert suites (and the Richmond was discontinued some time ago).

Ernst von Dohnányi's Everest record of Beethoven's Opera 109 and 110 piano sonatas is described as a "relic," with the further comment: "The ancient Dohnányi disc is a historical document and is to be respected." It is a historical document, perhaps, but neither "ancient" nor a "relic," having been recorded shortly before Dohnányi's death in 1960.

Monteverdi's *Magnificat* is discussed separately from the complete recordings of the *Vespro della Beata Vergine*, and not identified as a section of the larger work. Moreover, Russcol states, "Both the Nonesuch and Turnabout discs [of the *Magnificat*] include the stark Schütz work on the reverse," while actually different works of Schütz appear on the two discs.

Russcol advises that "Ristenpart uses Helmut Winschermann's arrangement" of Bach's *Art of the Fugue* on Nonesuch. Ristenpart did indeed record the Winschermann version, but the Nonesuch set, one of his last recordings, presents the work in the orchestration of Marcel Bitsch and Claude Pascal. The utterly different Winschermann version is offered by the Musical Heritage Society, but there is no reference to that release. Ristenpart's superior remake of the Bach *Magnificat*, also on MHS, is ignored, too. In fact, although the MHS catalogue is the largest single aggregation of low-priced discs, totaling nearly 600 now, only six MHS items are listed in the book.

Telemann's famous Suite in A minor

(for flute and strings) is a work of which "a definitive recording . . . has yet to appear on a low-priced label," according to Russcol, but the superb version by Hans-Martin Linde and the Collegium Aureum under Rolf Reinhardt, released on Victrola two years ago, simply is not listed. Neither is any recording of the Janáček *Sinfonietta*, despite the current availability of the magnificent Ancerl recording on both Turnabout and Parliament.

Among the other conspicuous omissions are such notable discs as the late Tauno Hannikainen's Sibelius Second on Crossroads; Peter Maag's substantially complete *Midsummer Night's Dream* music and Rafael Kubelík's Dvorák E-major Serenade on London/STS; orchestral Satie conducted by Maurice Abravanel on Cardinal and by Manuel Rosenthal on Everest; Satie's piano music by Jacques Février and Georges Auric on Everest and by Frank Glazer on Vox; the Schuricht Schubert Ninth on Vanguard/Everyman, Kondrashin's Mahler Ninth and the Borodin Quartet's complete Shostakovich cycle on Melodiya/Seraphim; the Busoni and Milhaud collections on Candide; and the Philips World Series disc of violin concertos by Milhaud and Barber.

On the book's final page, Russcol advises the reader to "avoid reprocessed stereo where possible," but he apparently cannot recognize it. The Kubelík *Pictures at an Exhibition*, one of Mercury's first single-microphone recordings (1951), "rechanneled" a few years ago, is commended as "a solid, high-tension stereo version, extremely well recorded."

The author himself may not have been responsible for the jacket blurb reading: "During the last two years there has been a tremendous production of low-priced classical records" (it goes back much further than that, of course), and stating that the book "deals specifically with classical records selling under \$2.50" (the average list price is \$2.98); but he must take the credit for listing such works as Penderecki's *St. Luke Passion* and *Hiroshima Threnody*, Gunther Schuller's *Seven Studies on Themes of Paul Klee*, and the Boulez *Le Marteau sans maître* under the heading "Electronic Music," with the comment that they are "some of the most important productions of the electronic age."

Unfortunately, a great many people, possibly eager for just such guidance as this book purports to provide, are inclined to place a good deal of confidence in the printed word, particularly when the word is given permanence in the form of a book nearly two inches thick.

—RICHARD FREED.

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Basie

William "Count" Basie runs a Cadillac of a band. Sleek and powerful, it performs with watchlike precision, shifting gears with surprising smoothness. The contemporary Basie sound is large and opulent and far more "perfect" than the Basie of old. Flash, flair, sensuous thrust, and, above all, the stamp of approval of show biz personalities, notably Frank Sinatra, have endeared the piquant pianist and his men to a large mass of people who had no idea the band existed a few years ago. After more than three decades as a band leader, the quietly affable, self-effacing Basie has a reassuring degree of economic security—on the face of things—and can look forward to a relatively level future.

In person, Basie always provides a memorable "physical" experience. The band lifts and takes one along, ever building, punching, feinting, backing off, exploding in multiple climaxes, and bringing the listener the sense of realization he expected all along. It is difficult to remain unaffected when in the same room with this instrument of seemingly limitless energy. Simultaneously, one is stimulated and stunned to submission by the group's strength and unity and vigor. When a phonograph is placed between the auditor and the band, however, more of the truth comes clear. The separation creates a sense of objectivity impossible in more immediate circumstances.

Basie albums have followed a pattern in recent years. He records with major and minor singers, involves himself in a variety of "popular" projects—all in the cause of continued prosperous life. Occasionally, though, the pianist tapes LPs that purport truly to mirror his band. *Basie/Straight Ahead* (Dot stereo, DLP 25902, \$4.98), entirely comprised of originals and arrangements by Sammy Nestico, is an offering in this category.

Nestico, a former Charlie Barnet, Tommy Dorsey, and Gene Krupa saxophonist, was chief arranger for the U.S. Marine Band in Washington, D.C., until last year. A facile craftsman with a propensity for the melodious, he unfortunately gives little indication of possessing great rapport with the Basie style. He fails to explore adequately the band's blues nature and to ignite fully the enormous sense of life so characteristic of this body of men. His nine compositions are well played, yet seem curiously bland in the listening, and easily could have been written for other bands with jazz propensities. Unlike Quincy Jones, Ernie Wilkins, Manny Albam, Frank Foster, and certainly Neal Hefti, Nestico does not unleash the rhythmic flow, the foundation and prime strength of this organization, or move inside the soul of Basie jazz.

Hefti, in particular, provokes pulsation, allowing nothing to get in its way. Like the other arrangers who know

best how to showcase the Basie band, he edits out the extraneous and develops shapely scores in which much happens and more is possible. His material, blues-oriented and tailored to swing, moves right along. Blocks of ensemble color and competitive call and response effects are provocatively placed. Sound densities are varied; dynamics and shading come into play. Excellent use is made of space and silences, so much a part of the Basie thing. Soloists shake loose, often supported by consonant, sharp-edged riffs or exclamations of differing volume. The outstanding arrangements for the contemporary Basie band, such as those by Hefti, et al., preserve a feeling of spontaneity within a rigidly stylized context. They carve out a well-defined identity for this unit, while cementing a strong link with its memorable past.

Nestico only superficially follows in the tradition. Not that it is an absolute must to do so. But what he has written does not stand comparison with the work of others who move easily within the Basie pattern. There are rays of promise, however; his ballads—e.g., "That Warm Feeling"—are a quiet matter of tasty textures and define feeling in a natural, pleasing manner. And there is at least one up-tempo item, "The Magic Flea," a small gem of a performance, in which the band finds itself. But, in general, the charts created to make bottoms wiggle and fingers snap either sound homogenized or press too hard for a groove. Soloists get comparatively little opportunity; they serve only as an inlay, another set of colors within reed-heavy scores. As for Basie—he seems unusually reserved during these performances. Generally the spice in the cake, he is forced into a background role. And the band seldom gets off the dime as it deals with the well-designed paper work.

Standing Ovation, Basie's newest release (Dot stereo, DLP 25938), is another matter. An exercise in nostalgia, recorded at the Tropicana Hotel in Las Vegas, it endeavors to recount recent and not so recent glories of this great band. In the final analysis, the venture's success or failure depends on your age, experience, and, particularly, the tune under consideration.

Much of the material contained in the set was popularized by the Basie contingent that came east from Kansas City in 1936, the group of musicians that brought fresh concepts to the jazz scene, in the process paving the way for modern jazz. When listening to today's "modernized" versions of "Down for Double," "Broadway," "Jive at Five," "Jumpin' at the Woodside," "Blue and Sentimental," and "Every Tub," it soon became apparent to me, particularly after referring to the origi-



—From "The Big Bands."

Count Basie—"a launching pad for great soloists." The 1940 band at the Apollo Theater in Harlem: Left: Walter Page, string bass; Basie, piano-leader; saxists Buddy Tate, Tab Smith, Jack Washington, and Lester Young. Rear: drummer Jo Jones, guitarist Freddie Green, trumpeter Buck Clayton, trombonists Vic Dickenson (hiding Ed Lewis), and Dickie Wells, trumpeters Al Killian and Harry Edison, and trombonist Dan Minor.