

The "Great Recordings" Revisited

The resurrection and augmentation of Angel's "Great Recordings" series on the \$2.49 Seraphim label is a phenomenon at delightfully sharp variance with the inflationary temper of our times. At the new price these recorded performances are now about one-fifth their prewar 78-rpm cost. And if the comparison were to be made in terms of real buying power—1939 dollars vs. 1969 dollars—the decline would appear even more astonishing. What other pleasure-yielding commodity has so successfully defied the consequences of Keynesian economics?

But a valuation solely in terms of dollars and cents does these reissues a profound injustice. They not only cost less; they sound better. Hearing them again in close succession inevitably provokes the question, "Why don't they make records like this anymore?" The query is of particular pertinence to this listener, who has found himself in recent years deriving less and less pleasure from the general run of new releases, and turning more and more often to recordings made twenty, thirty, even forty years ago. Is it sheer antiquarianism that has sent him scurrying back to these old performances, or do they really possess definable points of superiority?

In attempting to formulate an answer, due allowance must be made for the power of nostalgia. Record listeners have a peculiar penchant for the sounds of yesteryear, especially if they carry a heavy freight of memories. But remembrance of things past will take us only so far. Beyond that point, the old recordings must make it on their own. And they do so, I submit, for three essential reasons. First, they date from an epoch when musicians cultivated individuality more than today, when they were less afraid to express personal idiosyncrasies in performance. Second, the absence of tape splicing and insertions in pre-1950 recordings insures a sense of immediacy and reality that has largely disappeared from today's artificially perfected productions. Third, survival of the fittest has left us with the cream of the old crop, and has relegated the mediocre remainder to oblivion.

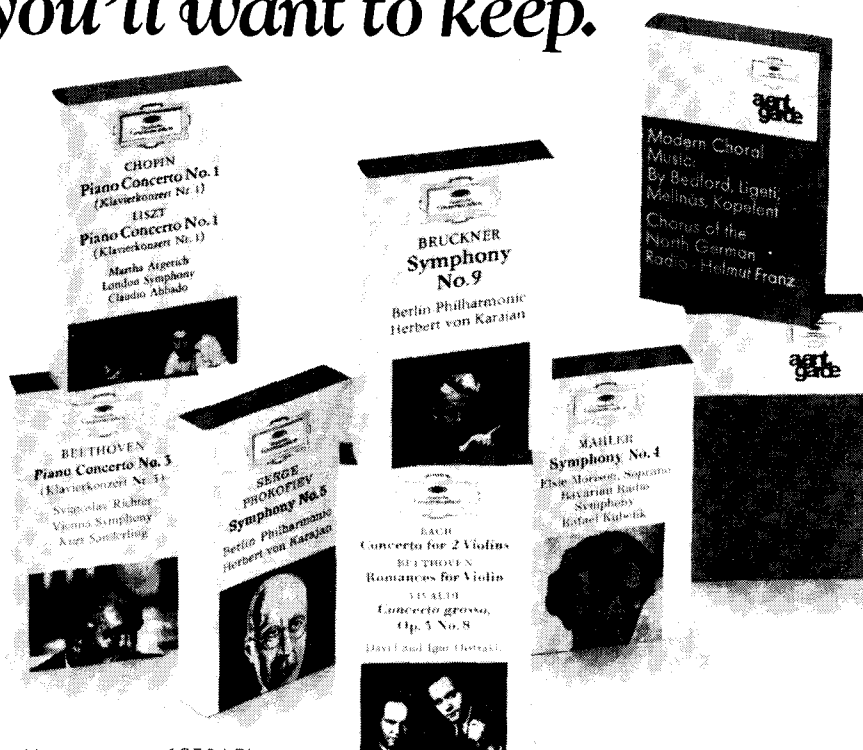
A substantial portion of that crop can be found among the twenty-two discs comprising Seraphim's initial "Great Recordings" release. A few are

direct transfers from the former Angel series, unchanged in every respect save for price and packaging. Most of them, however, are new reissues of recordings long unavailable in this country. For reasons presumably related to merchandising, a good deal of this material has been consolidated in a series

of three-record sets bearing omnibus titles. To the discriminating collector such conglomerations are always hazardous, since they are almost certain to include some unwanted items. But in view of the low cost and generally sagacious choice of contents, there is really small cause for complaint.

Surely, the set entitled *Six Chamber Music Masterpieces* merits consideration if only for the Schnabel-Pro Arte account of Mozart's G-minor Piano Quartet, in which the pianist's probing, subtly sculptured style finds a perfect foil in the Pro Arte's patrician, understated collaboration. Having justified itself with this plum, the set then pro-

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ceeds to offer such further delicacies as the Beethoven *Kreutzer* Sonata performed by Fritz Kreisler and Franz Rupp (sentimental by today's standard, admirably convincing by yesterday's); Mendelssohn's D-minor Piano Trio as expounded by Casals-Cortot-Thibaud; the Brahms Horn Trio played by Serkin, Adolf Busch, and Aubrey Brain (father of the late Dennis); Fauré's G-minor Piano Quartet, with Marguerite Long at the keyboard; and a brilliant interpretation of the Debussy Cello Sonata by Maurice Maréchal and Robert Casadesus.

The compilation of *Six Concertos* is notable for inclusion of a 1929 Barcelona recording of the Brahms Double Concerto with Cortot on the podium, and Casals and Thibaud as soloists. This was the last occasion on which the celebrated trio collaborated before the recording microphones, and it represents Cortot's only appearance on records in the role of conductor (among other exploits, he had led the first French performance of *Götterdämmerung* in 1902). Here the restricted sound is something of an overall liability, though it puts no obstacles in the way of savoring the soloists' impassioned, warmly cohesive partnership. This set also contains the Fifth *Brandenburg*, performed with relaxed unanimity of spirit under Adolf Busch; the Mozart C-minor, with Edwin Fischer at the keyboard; Schnabel's 1946 version of the Beethoven No. 2; Kreisler's classic Mendelssohn; and a creator's account of the Ravel Concerto in G by pianist Marguerite Long and conductor Maurice Ravel. In my book, all qualify for posterity's attention, except for Fischer's glibly played (and sloppily accompanied) Mozart.

In *Six Legendary Pianists*, alas, Seraphim's compiler faltered. The set is worth having for Myra Hess's marvelously serene Opus 109 Beethoven and Schnabel's eloquent *Moments Musicaux*. But what a pity that the rest is not up to this level. Instead of Gieseking's colorless, uninvolved Mozart, why not the still-unissued K. 332 Sonata by Landowska (recorded on the piano in 1939)? And instead of Bach by Edwin Fischer, why not that of the much-esteemed Harold Samuels? Again, Alfred Cortot is poorly represented by his inaccurate and eccentric 1953 recording of the Chopin "Funeral March" Sonata; a far worthier choice would have been his poetic interpretation of Schumann's *Kinderszenen*. And though Solomon gives a good account of *Car-naval*, it is not in the same class as his breathtaking scamper through Brahms's Handel Variations. Fortunately, Landowska's Mozart can be heard on a separate disc coupling the

richly ornamented *Coronation* Concerto with a Haydn harpsichord concerto.

For vocal aficionados the pickings are not as copious as might be expected. A record called *Great Voices of the Century* runs the gamut from 1902 vintage Caruso ("Questa o quella") to 1944 vintage Teyte (Debussy's "Beau soir") by way of John McCormack (Handel), Feodor Chaliapin (Musorgsky), and Elisabeth Schumann (Schubert), among others. This olla-podrida is pretty good of its kind, but could have been put together more imaginatively. Surely a better Melba might have been selected than her dim and spineless "Mattinata" (why not the electrically recorded "Dite alla giovane" with John Brownlee?), and a more representative Muzio than her gutty "Voi lo sapete" (why not the "Addio" from *Bohème*?). Otherwise there is the welcome reappearance of the Lehmann-Schumann-Mayr *Rosenkavalier* excerpts—the standard by which all other performances of this opera are inevitably judged. In its Seraphic incarnation the set comes with a bonus record on which Lehmann sings the *Ariadne* and *Arabella* arias, and Elisabeth Schumann performs eight Strauss songs with that soaring, floating radiance that was uniquely hers.

Admirers of Hans Hotter will rejoice in a three-record set devoted principally to Schubert's *Winterreise* and *Schwanengesang*. I confess to a blind spot with regard to this singer, and cannot share in the jubilation. But there is no resisting a recital of Carl Nielsen songs by Aksel Schiotz, recorded between 1938 and 1941, when the Danish tenor was at the peak of his fresh-voiced glory.

The annotations are not as thoroughgoing as those in the Angel "Great Recordings" series, but they provide all the essential information, including dates of recording. The sound? That all depends on your point of view. To my ears, the vocal, solo instrumental, and chamber ensemble waxings of the 1930s and 1940s hold their own very well with comparable stereo tapings of today (opera and orchestral recordings are another story). But perhaps my ears are hopelessly middle-aged. At any rate, Seraphim's engineers have done an exemplary job in transferring these old recordings to microgroove. Needless to say, everything appears in honest mono. Thanks to the good taste and intransigence of Mr. Brown Meggs, Capitol's vice president in charge of classics, Seraphim continues to turn a deaf ear to those know-nothing dealers who cry out for stereo even when the stereo is manifestly bogus.

—ROLAND GELATT.

Ozawa in Transit

Continued from page 48

passage into the coda was played. The second movement was untouched. Ozawa launched the men into the third movement with a surge of vitality, but soon began shouting cues to skip ahead. A few firm baton strokes set the character for the finale. There was a warning "here the repeat was not to be observed," and the rehearsal was over.

On this foundation Ozawa secured a performance. Six days later, when the men reported to Orchestra Hall to record the work for RCA, the performance was still there—and they were fresh, interested, and ready to participate fully in developing the potential. Hearing the first playback, Ozawa was immediately self-critical, and his words of thanks began to be intermixed with such phrases as "I was wrong," or "Here we must. . . ." The men only needed the guidance, and a new idea was generally fully realized on the first try. Now Ozawa was doing what he could not do in his brief rehearsal, departing from the familiar to implant his own distinctive thinking on the final product.

Once more, I was thinking of Walter and Szell. In a pinch, they could provide an acceptable Beethoven symphony in next to no rehearsal. But who of Ozawa's generation, other than himself, could be trusted with the assignment? Few, I think. Very few. For here technical security, depth of musicianship, and a sure sense of style are uppermost, and, when the pressure is on, these things cannot be faked. In Ozawa's case, no faking is necessary, and this is why his players respect him. He leads because his right to lead has been made clear to the most critical of juries.

No enterprise involving a stageful of musicians can be without some personality conflicts, and Ozawa knows this. Thus, while concentrating on a desired effect ("I try again, I must try. . ."), his ear can pick a single malefactor out of the strings ("One reason it is not right is that someone takes off his mute too early. . ."). Ozawa is not listening to his internal, idealized performance, but is acutely focused on what the men before him are actually doing.

In five years of fairly regular conversations with Ozawa, I have come to the conclusion that he is an easy person with whom to work but a difficult person to know well. His relaxed approach, his seemingly impenetrable cool, his total lack of pretension or egotism all make superficial exchanges easy and pleasant. He is obviously a genuinely polite, considerate, and un-

derstanding person, quite apart from any social or cultural factor.

But behind this facade of good manners there is obviously a lot going on, and the character of that process is not always easy to judge. Indeed, the point of the good manners appears, at times, to deny you the raw materials needed for such judgment. Thus, paradoxically, this young conductor, who seems so friendly and accessible, preserves what probably must be called his spiritual privacy more successfully than many of his senior colleagues, who are aloof, self-revealing autocrats in their personal contacts. Ozawa shows no sign of wishing to be an autocrat, no desire to be a celebrity.

"Professionally," he observes, "I am a very cosmopolitan person. I play the music of many countries to audiences all over the world. But personally, I am still very Japanese. I realize this, and I have no wish to change." Again, of course, he is being polite.

Ozawa will praise a work of music, the musicians he leads, and his colleagues, but I have no recollection of his ever praising himself. (This, too, I suspect, comes under the heading of bad taste.) To speak of his Fifth (rather than Beethoven's) would be offensive to him, I am sure.

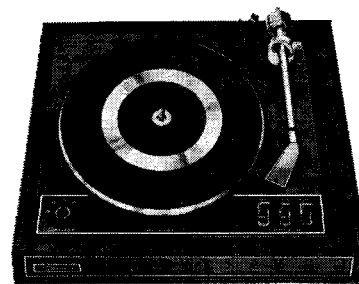
Is there, I asked facetiously, an Ozawa sound?

"No," he replied. "Only the composer's—at least for now. I may change as I grow older." Smiling, he added, "I may become more limited."

Yet the fact that he would indulge in a quip such as that is further evidence of change. You can see it as well in his rehearsal technique, which has become more direct. In the past, he tended to avoid straightforward criticism of a player's work. It was very Japanese and indirect: Was his tempo too fast, the material faulty, the beat unclear? Now, especially when on deadline, he will say it flat out—"You are too loud," "That is the wrong note," and so on—without, one must add, the slightest hard feelings from the ensemble, which has heard these phrases before from other conductors.

Perhaps a key to his success is his sense of the paradoxical. "An orchestra, after all," he says, "is a very unnatural thing. An impossible thing, almost. A musician naturally wants to play alone, or in a group where he can be heard, appreciated, and still express his individuality. This is why *Così fan tutte* is so marvelous—chamber music for 100 musicians. But for so much music, the musicians must submerge themselves into an orchestra to make the necessary sound and let one musician tell them how to play. Whenever it goes well, I am happy, because it is surprising that it ever works at all."

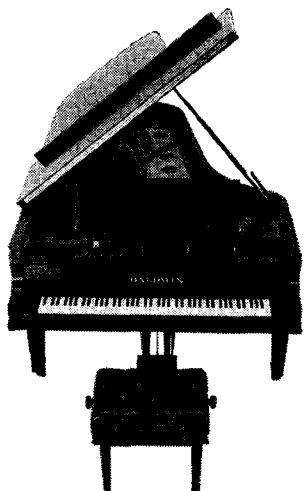
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Letters to the Recordings Editor

Ellen, the Rock Garden, and Johnny Winter

FOR THE PAST three or four months I have been following *SR*'s somewhat overanalytical explanations and long-winded critiques regarding the "rock garden," as Miss Sander so aptly expressed it, and have generally enjoyed them—even though disagreeing with more than a few. Miss Sander must be commended for her honest approach and self-appointed attitude of guardian angel of the rock world. That rock connoisseurs do not need people like her is of no consequence, and does not taint her good intentions. Her articles would help (if you want to think of it as help) to dissolve the wall that many older people—the over-thirties seem to have been stereotyped as non-enjoyers of pop—still retain regarding this type of music.

That was just an introduction for what I'm going to say about Martin Williams. In "New Adventures of the Jazz Guitar" [*SR*, July 26], he hands Johnny Winter a rather severe downgrading by saying that *hundreds* of black blues guitarists are better than he is. Now, I'm not a professional music reviewer, but I do know that when a well-known magazine allows one of its staff to make such a wide generalization it must be quite certain that it can be supported with facts or honest opinions. I publicly *dare* Mr. Williams to qualify his statement and name fifteen (not two hundred!) blues guitarists—black, white, red, or glacial blue—whom he believes to be better than Winter. Perhaps Williams didn't pay his professional attention to the last cut on Johnny Winter's first album; I doubt that Williams could name fifteen blues guitarists who could top that performance.

I would now like to qualify my accusations by making it clear that I don't believe Winter is the best blues guitarist around—but rather much better than Williams seems to think. I'm disagreeing as much with Williams's lack of precise terminology as with his unfair remarks about a very fine musician. And as a final response: Why did he place Winter in an article entitled "New Adventures of the Jazz Guitar"? I was under the impression that he was a blues guitarist. Two inaccurate and gross generalizations make any article quite unbearable.

CONSTANTINE GEORGE ALIKES,
Canandaigua, N.Y.

Korall and Jazz-Rock

BURT KORALL's article "Can Jazz-Rock Find Happiness Together?" [*SR*, July 12] was, at best, a disappointing treatment of a vibrant musical field. His spotlighting of Blood, Sweat and Tears as the group spearheading the jazz-rock fusion was totally unwarranted for several reasons. First of all, Blood, Sweat and Tears has never attained anything near to a "fusion" of the two styles. Though a listener to their latest album is treated to bits of

jazz and rock within the same song, the two styles never merge. Instead, all that is present is an incoherent and often tasteless failure.

But more importantly, Korall scarcely mentioned the British group, Ten Years After, that has been at the forefront of the jazz-rock merger for the past three years. This quartet successfully unified these musical idioms in a manner which displays none of the pretentiousness that characterizes the recent style of Blood Sweat and Tears. Though the future for jazz-rock is still bright, there should be no doubt it will be Ten Years After that will continue to lead the way.

WILLIAM G. VISCUSI,
Louisville, Ky.

Package and Content

RE: A letter from Mrs. Gretchen Bliss, Mt. Carmel, Connecticut [*SR*, Aug. 30], it would seem that in deriding the "salesmanship" of John and Yoko, Mrs. Bliss falls prey to the fault of cherishing the wrapping, but not the contents, of a package so completely attractive as peace.

What pretty decorations must believers in peace wear? They have abducted me from work on my Masters in English literature and clothed me in olive drab. Despite all their efforts I am still a believer in peace. Would you spill blood all over me and call me a weapon of war?

PFC. JOHN F. DZURAK, JR.,
APO,
San Francisco, Calif.

Presser and Santa Fe

IN REFERENCE to the statement in "Santa Fe's Operatic Oasis" [*SR*, Aug. 30]: "Nearby are a musicians' lounge and practice rooms whose cost was contributed by the music publishing firm of Theodore Presser, Inc."

Please be advised that this money was contributed by the Presser Foundation. The Theodore Presser Company does not participate in such activities.

We realize mistakes must happen and we shall consider the matter closed.

JOHN RONALD OTT,
President,
The Presser Foundation,
Philadelphia, Pa.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The credit was verbalized and probably misunderstood.*

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