

RECORDINGS IN REVIEW

BY IRVING KOLODIN

The Low-Key Debussy of Jean-Rodolphe Kars

Debussy: *Préludes* (Books 1 and 2). Jean-Rodolphe Kars, piano. London stereo, CSA 2230, \$11.96.

The best of what Jean-Rodolphe Kars has to offer in his four sides of the twenty-four Debussy *Préludes* is heard within the first ten seconds of "Danseuses de Delphes," first in the sequence. That is a piano sound of the even resonance, ear-clinging sonority, and liquid flow, without which an aspirant to the mystic realm inhabited by these works faces a difficult journey indeed.

Better still, it stays with Kars through the gamut of possibilities embodied in "Voiles," "Brouillards," "La Danse de Puck," and "Ondine," to mention but a few stylistically diverse concepts evolved by Debussy in this set. This is all to the good, an indication that it is inherent in the conditioning of a performer born in Calcutta of Austrian parents, reared in France, and active most recently in England.

But such a sound at the piano is, like a beautiful voice in a singer, only the beginning of musical virtue. It must be animated, shaped, molded, and refined to the artistic purposes of the composer, or it is but a wasted asset. Kars plays most of the *Préludes* quite well, but none of them sufficiently well for one to assume that all Debussy would be safe in his hands.

Even in such familiar concepts as "La fille aux cheveux de lin," "La Puerta del Vino," and "General Lavine—eccentric," the color values are sensitive but blurred. There are times indeed—as in "Canope" or "Feux d'artifice," in which abandon could be indulged—when one has a feeling that Kars is listening to the sound he is making rather than to the way it should be applied to the composer's purpose. That is to say, it is narcissistic rather than Debussian.

Withal, the resources of power are there, as may be gleaned from an outburst here, a climax there. It would be an illumination of Kars's total capacities, as well as an augury for his future, if London were to present him in such larger works, in which the low-key approach cannot be condoned, as *L'Isle joyeuse*, *Estantes*, *Images*, etc. There can be nothing but praise for the beauty of the reproduced sound.

Beethoven's Third, Henze's First

Beethoven: Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Opus 37. Christoph Eschenbach, piano,

with Hans Werner Henze conducting the London Symphony Orchestra. DG stereo, 2530 254, \$6.98.

Someone at Deutsche Grammophon obviously thinks well of Hans Werner Henze. In addition to recording his works as they are written, with some conspicuous successes as well as rather more inconspicuous nonsuccesses, he is now being sponsored as the interpreter of other composers' works. The question is, of course, What qualities does he bring to the interpretation of Beethoven that other conductors do not?

In terms of this work, I'd say very few. It differs from other average, non-inspired performances in that it stresses certain details that would be more meaningful to a composer/conductor than they would be to a noncomposer/conductor. Included are the emphases on the timpani in the first and last movements, a wood-wind detail here, a string passage there, or a stress on the trumpet in the very last chord of the first movement.

I do not hear, however, anything else that might be construed as a Henze view of Beethoven. It is a straightforward, conventional conception that he espouses, lacking in the tightly controlled dynamics and firmly outlined melodic phraseology that generate the tension to hold the listener's attention. I would attribute this to limited experience in organizing such music for public performance, rather than to any lack of perception. Some may charge this as a judgment based on the known identity of the conductor. I would accept that charge, but only in explanation of the reasons advanced. The condition exists with or without reference to the conductor.

Eschenbach is a pianist of splendid technical, tonal, and musical resources, all of which are strong allies to his purpose. Save in the slow movement, which is beautifully realized on all sides, I do not hear as much that is creditable to him as in the recording of the First Concerto with Karajan conducting. The indications are that Eschenbach, at this stage of his career profits from the incitement as well as the excitement that a conductor of strong purpose and personality can provide. Both the first and the last movements lack drive in a performance that is always right-minded but sometimes faint-hearted. Good reproduction.

Words by Chopin, et al., Music by Argento

Argento: *Letters From Composers*. Vern

Sutton, tenor; and Jeffrey Van, guitar. Mayer: Brass Quintet. Iowa Brass Quintet. *Six Miniatures*; *Khartoum*; *Two News Items*. Catherine Rowe, soprano; with ensemble conducted by Arthur Weisberg, CRI stereo, SD 291, \$5.95.

On the premise, perhaps, that there is more poetry in the prose of great composers than there is music in the poetry of the average poet, Dominick Argento has applied himself to the documentation of his thesis via excerpts from the letters of seven celebrated musicians.

Chopin from Majorca to a friend in Paris, Mozart from Vienna to his father in Salzburg, Schubert from Vienna to a friend in an unidentified locality, Bach to the town council. Debussy from Le Molleau, and Puccini from Paris to a friend in Italy—all are depicted by Argento in various states of discontent with their lots as composers. Only Schumann, writing from Leipzig to his beloved Clara in Paris, is caught in the state of euphoria (in his case a more or less natural habitat). If this preponderance of complaint is an involuntary reflection of Argento's own attitude to his life as a composer, he has, at least, mirrored it in music of variety and decided singability. The idea of combining music for a light, flexible tenor voice (which Vern Sutton assuredly has) with accompaniments for an agile guitarist (which Jeffrey Van unquestionably is) makes for an intimacy of effect admirably suited to the material. It also defines the York, Pennsylvania, native as a composer of uncommon understanding of vocal possibilities and problems.

The side devoted to works of William Mayer offers a brightly written, well-played quintet for brass and nine songs. The texts are by Elizabeth Aleinikoff, Alfred Noyes, Dorothy Parker, and the composer himself, an indication of the value that may accrue with an education derived from Yale University and the Mannes College of Music. The first six are skillful, rather nondistinctive settings that tend to sound very much the same because Miss Rowe's voice has few color contrasts, but the last two are real gems. They investigate the satiric possibilities in such titles as "Hastily Formed Contemporary Music Ensemble Reveals Origins" and "Distracted Soprano Undergoes Unfortunate Transformation" with truly satiric results. The glittering texts (by Mayer) are gaily performed by Miss Rowe, CRI's recording techniques are better able to deal with the tenor and guitar than with the instrumental ensemble and soprano voice.

The Best of Mozart and of Colin Davis

Mozart: *Vesperae solennes de confessore* (K. 339); *Kyrie* (K. 341); *Ave, verum corpus* (K. 618); and *Exsultate, jubilate* (K. 165). Colin Davis conducting the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, with Kiri Te Kanawa, soprano; Elizabeth Bainbridge, mezzo; Ryland Davies, tenor; and Gwynne Howell, bass. Philips stereo, 6500 271, \$6.98.

Considering the rate at which even the best records come and go in the market place, it might be a word to the wary that they invest in two copies of this disc: one to play, the other to preserve for the future. The reasons for this are at least threefold: the unique quality of the material, the excellence of Colin Davis's direction, and the rare vocal qualifications of Kiri Te Kanawa (pronounced KAN-a-wa).



Such a name bears a few words of explanation on its own. She is a Maori, meaning a product of those who were New Zealanders before there was a New Zealand. Miss Te Kanawa has a bright, clear, fresh voice, decidedly well placed, and already heard in this country at the Santa Fe Opera, more recently in the San Francisco Opera's current production of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*.

Davis's choice of the Te Kanawa voice for two solo opportunities on this disc is a tribute both to his judgment and to her abilities. To those to whom the *Vesperae solennes* is a new experience, it may be described as a product of Mozart's last years in Salzburg (1779–1780), a church work rich in emotion and musical resource. Others may recall it for the fifth segment, entitled "Laudate Dominum," beloved of vocal connoisseurs ever since its first recording by Ursula van Dieman in 78 rpm days. One can hardly praise Te Kanawa's talents more highly than to say that she sings it as well as it ever has been heard on records.

In her other assignment Miss Te Kanawa is required to sing a florid as well as a *legato* line in the *Exsultate, jubilate*, with more variable results. The

sound is endearingly attractive in all circumstances, but she does not control it as well in the final "Alleluia" as she does in the preceding Andante. This is a marginal distinction, indicating a respect in which she can still further her command of a beautiful sound.

The results are enhanced by Davis's strong feeling for the idiom, his ability to discriminate between a brisk and a hurried pace, his capability to animate even a leisurely line. The additional soloists and choral ensemble are admirably suited to the music. The recording is both spacious and well defined.

The Twilight Glow of Strauss's "Capriccio"

Strauss: *Capriccio*. Gundula Janowitz, Tatiana Troyanos, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Hermann Prey, Karl Ridderbusch, Peter Schreier, and David Thaw; with Karl Böhm conducting the Orchestra of the Bavarian Radio, and dialogue directed by August Everding. DG stereo, 2709 038, \$20.94.

Anyone seeking a "state-of-the-art" report on phonography 1972 could hardly be commended to a better example than this new *Capriccio*, the first since Angel's pioneering one of the late Fifties and only the second ever. If you can imagine the kind of sound produced by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Hermann Prey in the same cast, then you can also auralize the comparable efforts of Gundula Janowitz and Tatiana Troyanos. Karl Ridderbusch has to give ground to the authority possessed by Hans Hotter, the first impersonator of La Roche and one of the durable distinctions of the Angel issue, but Ridderbusch contributes to the exceptional blend of sounds marshaled by Karl Böhm.

For those suspicious of any Strauss opera composed after *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (which is to say, after 1917), *Capriccio* may be described as an eminently trustworthy exception. It is, of course, the last stage work in the long succession that began with *Guntram* nearly fifty years before. Seventy-seven when he completed it in 1941, but with nearly a decade of life left to him, Strauss resolutely refused even to think of writing another stage work. "One can have only one Will," he replied to such urgings.

And well he might have been satisfied to close the book whose pages contained *Salome*, *Elektra*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, and *Frau ohne Schatten* (among others). It is a work that only a ripe artist, possessed of both the means and the wisdom that are bred by the creation of masterworks, could have contemplated, let alone achieved.

To summarize briefly, the subject matter of *Capriccio* is the thing dearest

beloved of opera enthusiasts—opera itself. A composer and a poet are rivals for the love of a countess, each contending that his art is greater. As the work unfolds, she chides the poet for not understanding that his sonnet (borrowed from Ronsard) affects her more deeply when it is sung. She annoys the composer by reminding him that he must use words to convey his expression of love, that music alone does not suffice. At the end the moral is clear: Together—in a manner well known to Nature—they beget a third thing neither could achieve alone.

On the face of it this suggests a sketch, a philosophical treatise, perhaps an amusing dissertation, but hardly the materials with which to interest an audience for two-and-a-half uninterrupted hours. But Strauss and his equally theater-wise collaborator, the conductor Clemens Krauss, have so enriched it with action appropriate to its 1777 setting (a château belonging to the countess not far from Paris) that it is constantly renewed by such character studies as that of the director, La Roche (modeled after Max Reinhardt). It is in such details as Hotter's La Roche, Nicolai Gedda's composer, and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf's countess that producer Walter Legge's masterful work for Angel will retain its unique place in the lore of operatic recording.

As for Böhm's credentials: He was preempted by Krauss from the honor of conducting the premiere in Munich in 1942, but he did it shortly thereafter in Zurich. Since the death of Krauss in 1954, he has been the work's senior specialist, and he brings to the recording a loving sense of sound, and a sense of how Strauss used it in this score, that is scarcely surpassable.

It is a special pleasure to hear Janowitz in the vocal form for which she was admired before the digression to such a role as Sieglinde in the Karajan *Walküre*. Her countess is definitely a younger sister to the one impersonated by Schwarzkopf. She is not as wise in her heart and must depend more on the meaning she derives from the text. Janowitz delivers a stint of beautiful singing rarely heard from anyone, with Troyanos's clear, clinging sound beautifully blended with it by Böhm.

As commendations for Fischer-Dieskau (now the count, rather than the poet he was in the earlier recording) and Prey are unnecessary, it only remains to be mentioned that the urgent requirement for clear enunciation of the text has been artfully achieved by Everding. Indeed, with Rudolf Koeckert to apply his chamber music expertise to the leadership of the string ensemble, with the German technicians in wizard form, this effort should answer the needs of a superior-sounding *Capriccio* for some time to come. □

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Books

Before Orwell, the Unmaking of Eric Blair

BY V. S. PRITCHETT

THE UNKNOWN ORWELL. By Peter Stansky and William Abrahams. Illustrated. 308 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$8.95.

It is sometimes said by sociologists that traditional English eccentricity will decline, and even has already declined, with the leveling of society. I do not believe this. The trait is far too loosely defined; it is the sort of blossom that can crop up regardless of class and has many variants. George Orwell was an example of this practical amateur who goes his own way, thinks things out for himself, and is simply one of our perennial rebels. He was something of an actor, priding himself on his contradictoriness, his common sense, and differences. It is true that he was an upper-class rebel—they abounded in the Thirties and during the Second World War—an old Etonian who served in the Burmese police, turned against the Empire and his class, and came to identify himself with the down-and-outs of industrial society, fought side by side with the POUM—the dissident Communist group—in the Spanish Civil War, unmasked the practices and, above all, the language of communism, and invented Big Brother; he was the never-quite-definable minority man. There was a rather exuberant fashion during his period for the inverted snobbery of dressing up in the guise of workers and sounding like one of “the people,” but there was nothing hearty in Orwell’s disguise. Indeed, it was less a disguise than evidence of a natural drift, as he dragged himself around in his shabby

V. S. Pritchett’s most recent books are *A Cab at the Door* and *Midnight Oil*.

clothes, smoking his cheap shag; there was something spectral about him, a mixture of the sardonic, the everyday, and the exalted. Tall, handsome, very thin, affectionate, and dissident, he seemed to seek more danger and suffering and the bleaker kinds of honesty, which he interrupted by reckless gaiety, but he could not eliminate the authoritative marks of the Edwardian gentleman. There was an unmistakable touch of an easy *de haut en bas*, as he conveyed that the *bas* for him was *en haut*. His whole personality was—to put it paradoxically—a masterly understatement. The flat, straying drawl was the mask of independence and vigor, and his inner loneliness was far from making him unable to enjoy the pleasures of life. To put it as his new biographers do, in another connection, he did not *not* enjoy himself. He could be very drastic with his friends but was genuinely appalled if he realized they had been upset by being called, say, liars, hypocrites, timeservers, and so on, and soon took it all back.

In a real sense Orwell’s temperament was close to the aristocratic. How was it formed? His early life has been sketched here and there in reminiscences by boys who knew him at school and by forgotten colleagues in Burma, but there has been no attempt to fill out the whole story of his early years—often the most important part of a writer’s life. This is now remedied by a very searching, clearheaded, and patient biographical portrait by two Americans, Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, whose previous collaboration, *Journey to the Frontier* (1966), told the stories of two young English poets killed in the Spanish Civil War. They write with delicacy and without falling into Anglophile clichés; they are very sensitive to the half-tones of English life. It is well known that George Orwell was a pseudonym for Eric Blair, and their general theory is that the two names indicate a split in character and that Blair vanished when Orwell appeared and expiated the guilt of Blair, the conventional servant of his class

and Empire. The matter cannot have been as simple as that, however, and it is to the credit of the authors that they are able to point out the ambiguities that clustered in his growth.

Of fundamental importance to Blair-Orwell, I have come to think, is the fact that he came of a family that had been rich in the eighteenth century, had married into the aristocracy, and had gone quietly downhill in the following generations, being a line of younger sons. They held to the upper-class traditions of public service, but, being poorish, they became modest clergy or unremarkable civil servants in India. The pressure on such families to maintain their social status was fierce. It was thought worth every sacrifice, especially as the great wealth—for others—of the Edwardian period came in. This was most strongly felt by the Anglo-Indians, who, living in a colony, would be more intense in their snobberies than their fellows in Britain; the Anglo-Indians as a group were, *vis-à-vis* people at home, inevitably out of date; the strain to “keep up,” or keep abreast, was all the stronger, and this is plain in the history of the Blair family. They were determined to send Eric to the most fashionable and expensive prep school and afterwards to Eton, the most prestigious and, in fact, just about the best school in England.

Eric was born in Bengal in 1903, a second child, but at four he came to England with his mother, who was going to have another baby; his father had to stay in India another four years waiting for his leave. The mother was a clever, cheerful woman, half-French, with Burmese connections, skillful at keeping afloat on a modest income, shrewd and ambitious. She saw to it that the boy got a scholarship to his first school, St. Cyprians, chosen because, if one could survive the cramming and the grind, a later scholarship to Eton was certain. He was eight when he left home; mother was exchanged for the rather fantastic general Mum, the headmaster’s wife. With its beatings, its discipline, its toughening-up, its snobbery,