
Music to My Ears

Recorded Oddities, Novelties, and Rarities

by Irving Kolodin

Instrumental

Bernstein: Music from *Mass*; *Candide* overture (DG). The values of the work Leonard Bernstein wrote half a dozen years ago for the opening of the Kennedy Center, in Washington, D.C., are diluted rather than strengthened in this effort by the Boston Pops Orchestra under the direction of Arthur Fiedler. The conductor's energetic point-making puts a prop under some parts of "Devotions before Mass," "Gloria Tibi," and "Credo" where it is helpful. But the absence of text takes away mightily from the planned purpose, as does Irwin Kostal's reorchestration to replace the missing voices. The *Candide* overture is brightly performed.

Delius: Double concerto for violin, cello, and orchestra (Angel). The typical patterns of Delius are enhanced by the violinistic art of Yehudi Menuhin. Only Delius, perhaps, could have called the first work, composed in 1919, a concerto, but that, to be sure, was his privilege. In the equally seductive product of 1915, Menuhin is joined by cellist Paul Tortelier. Here the results are something like a dream narrated by two rather than one—redundant. Meredith Davies gets a very good Delius sound in his conducting of the Royal Philharmonic.

Dvořák: Quintet in A (Opus 81) (RCA). Emanuel Ax, winner of the first Rubenstein competition in 1974, shows his mettle as a chamber music pianist in this fine collaboration with the Cleveland Quartet. This puts him in direct competition with his benefactor, as RCA already has a memorable version of this work in which Rubenstein is heard with the Guarneri Quartet.

Liszt: *Années de pèlerinage* (complete) (Connoisseur). In the years since he regularly appeared in this country as a young pianist, György Cziffra has gone a long way toward fulfilling his plentiful promise, particularly as a performer of Liszt. Here he takes on the mentally as well as mechanically challenging survey of the tours of "Switzerland," "Italy," and "Venice and Naples" embodied in the three

Années de pèlerinage and guides his listener skillfully through all their stimulating vistas. Cziffra tends to be thoughtful rather than flamboyant in such pieces as "Au bord d'une source," "Canzonetta del Salvator Rosa," and "Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este" (No. 1), a balance that is all to the good. Uncommonly fine piano sound.

Pienné: *Cydalise et le Chèvre-Pied* (Suites 1 and 2); Overture on Basque Themes from *Ramuntcho* (Angel). Gabriel Pienné is one of numerous French composers for whom the description "minor master" does not preclude the possession of invention, fantasy, and a decided sense of the picturesque. *Cydalise* (as the ballet of 1919 is generally known) is full of fluty flourishes and Pan-pipings in keeping with its "chèvre-pied" (faun, or "the goat footed"). The sounds are artfully extracted from the Paris Opera Orchestra by conductor Jean-Baptiste Mari, and the seldom-heard overture makes a diverting afterpiece.

Strauss: Concerto in D minor (Opus 8); Burleske in D minor (Angel). Why the early violin concerto of Richard Strauss is not better known only practitioners of the instrument could say. The first, "classical" phase of the young Strauss is, familiarly, full of Mendelssohnian allusions, but they are constantly colored in this work by the emerging character of the master-to-come. Ulf Hoelscher honors such teachers in this country as Josef Gingold and Ivan Galamian in producing a beautifully songful, finely spun (almost Heifetzian) sound in the solo part. Over-side, pianist Malcolm Frager achieves one of the best performances ever in collaboration with conductor Rudolf Kempe.

Opera

Lully: *Alceste* (Columbia). This six-side succession of scenes (some sung, some declaimed, and some instrumental in character) is far from the common conception of opera but close to the concepts from which French opera developed. Of particular interest are the instrumental episodes, invested in 1677 by Lully (a native of

Florence and a great favorite of Louis XIV) with the dance character that became an inseparable part of French opera in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The recorded *Alceste* (the only complete opera by Lully currently in the catalog) ebbs and flows in quality. At best it has a curious suggestion (minus arias) of Gluck, who also wrote an *Alceste*. For the most part, the female singers (especially Renée Auphan and Felicity Palmer) are superior to the male, of whom Marc Vento is the best and Bruce Brewer, who has the tenor lead as Admèt, is, unfortunately, the least good. However, for those with an interest in operatic oddities, this issue provides an uncommon opportunity to sample the French species in its infancy. The version is by Jean-Claude Malgoire, who also conducts, and the commentary by François Lesur is thoroughly illuminating. A French-English libretto is included.

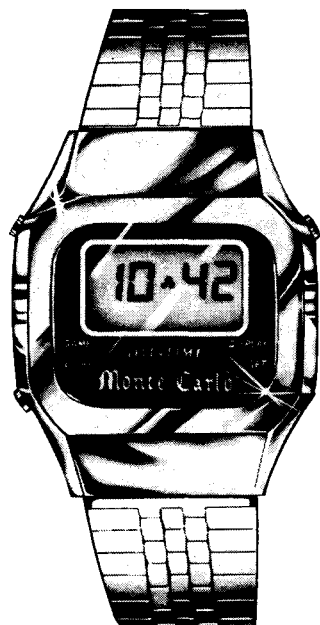
Vocal

Schumann: *Liederkreis* (Opus 24); Fifteen Songs from *Myrthen* (Opus 25) (DG). Neither Schumann nor Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau is in any way a stranger to us, but the product of this collaboration of the great baritone and the pianist Christoph Eschenbach does qualify among oddities, novelties, and rarities. Where else can one find performances on this level of such extraordinary songs (from *Myrthen*) as "Widmung," "Der Nussbaum," "Die Lotosblume," "Talismane," and "Du bist wie eine Blume"? Cheap at any price.

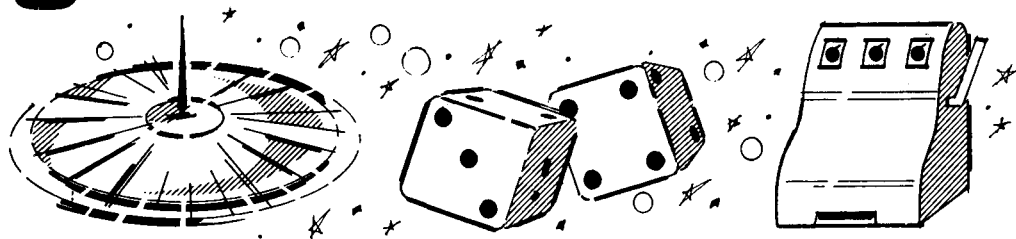
Miscellaneous

Dizzy Gillespie: "Free Ride" (Pablo). Muted, if not muffled, Gillespie is the prime attribute of this collaboration of the great trumpeter with Lalo Schiffrin as composer, arranger, conductor, and operator of the electronic keyboard. Also participating as masters of the subtleties on their instruments are Wa Wa Watson, electric guitar, Paulinho da Costa, percussion, and James Horn, sax and flute.

Fletcher Henderson and Orchestra (Smithsonian). A magnificent double dose of prime jazz (1923–1937) in which the Fletcher Henderson band is heard in updated sound of unprecedented clarity. Participants include Louis Armstrong ("Copenhagen"), "Fats" Waller ("The Henderson Stomp"), Rex Stewart, Coleman Hawkins, and Joe Smith ("Stampede"), and an infinity of others. Address the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. ©



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War of the Videotapes

by Roland Gelatt

IN THIS age of the ubiquitous "nonevent," it should be no surprise that one of this fall's major happenings will be the nonappearance of the much mooted, much delayed videodisc. Once again, promissory notes are being handed out in place of the real thing. The time may still come when we can put a videodisc of *Star Wars* on the turntable and play the movie through our television sets as easily as we can now play a record of the sound track through our stereo sets—but please don't hold your breath. Despite vast expenditures on research and development, and large dollops of premature publicity, the videodisc is still hovering diffidently in the wings.

Meanwhile, out on center stage is videotape, already well past its debut and about to play to really big audiences. So far, the market for home videotape equipment has remained the almost private preserve of Sony, the pathbreaking Japanese electronics firm that first brought us the pocket transistor radio some 20 years ago. But now several mass market merchandisers—RCA, Zenith, Magnavox, Pioneer, Sylvania, and Sears—are getting into the act. Since they will be touting rival and incompatible videotape systems, we can expect a deluge of claims and counterclaims in the next few months.

Videotape for the home arrived here less than two years ago with the introduction of Sony's Betamax, a compact recording device that hooks up to any color television set and employs half-inch videotape loaded into plastic cassettes. Today the Sony people insist that they knew right from the start how well Betamax would fare in the U.S. marketplace. Others say that its success far exceeded Sony's original expectations. At all events, some 60,000 Betamax units are already in use, and at least another 60,000 will be sold between now and Christmas. When you consider that a Betamax carries a \$1,300 price tag, it's easy to understand why other home electronics manufacturers want to muscle in on the business.

Two rival videotape systems will be confronting each other, and the hapless

consumer, this fall. An updated version of the Sony system, capable of recording uninterrupted for two hours instead of the original one hour, will be offered by Zenith, Sears, and Pioneer (as well as, of course, by Sony). Since Zenith and Sears stand, respectively, first and third in the U.S. color television market, their versions of the Betamax will not lack for promotional clout. But the company that stands second in color television sales, RCA, will be espousing a totally different videotape system. Developed by Matsushita in Japan, it's called the VHS (for Video Home System). Like the Betamax, the VHS uses half-inch tape in cassettes—but with a maximum record/play time of four hours compared to the Betamax's two. Lining up with RCA in favor of the VHS are Magnavox, Sylvania, and Matsushita's own American subsidiary, Panasonic. The incipient War of the Videotapes between these two alliances looks suspiciously like a replay of the War of the Speeds back in the late 1940s, when RCA launched the 45-rpm record as a challenge to Columbia's 33½-rpm disc. Eventually, the public learned to live with two record speeds, and doubtless it will also resign itself to two videotape systems.

Each system glories in videotape's so-called time-shift capability. Videotape frees the viewer from the tyranny of the television schedule. If you're out or otherwise engaged when a program you want to see goes on the air, videotape will capture it for later viewing (a timing mechanism turns the recorder on and off according to preset instructions). If you're interested in two programs that are being broadcast at the same time, you can pick up one on the television set and store the other on tape (the recorder has its own separate tuner). Essentially, videotape allows us to set our own TV schedules. If some of us persist in wanting to read a newspaper over the morning coffee, we can still catch an important interview on the *Today* show later on by recording it on videotape. Likewise, those of us who find it tiresome to stay up for the *Late, Late Show* need no longer curse the fact that old Marlene Dietrich films invariably go on the air in the wee hours: videotape

will allow us to watch them at a more civilized time.

There are some interesting long-term implications for TV programming in all this. As more and more homes become equipped with video recorders, prime time will begin to lose its scarcity value. Prime time now commands astronomical advertising rates because that's when most people want to watch television. But if enough households start using prime time to watch non-prime-time programs, the rules of the game may have to be changed.

Videotape is as readily erasable as audio tape: record a program, watch it once, then erase it and record another. The same cassette can be used over and over again. But it isn't working out that way. Contrary to all predictions, people are saving the programs they record on videotape. This is proven by the mushrooming sales of blank videotape cassettes. Despite their relatively high cost (\$16.95 for a two-hour cassette), blank videotape cassettes are selling in substantial quantities. There was a particularly heavy demand for them when *Gone With the Wind* was shown on television. In thousands of homes, *GWTW* can now be replayed whenever the fancy chooses.

The very thought sends a chill through the owners of such properties. If their films can be copied off the air in thousands of homes today, and in millions tomorrow, who will want to pay to see them? The chill has prompted MCA, the entertainment conglomerate, and Walt Disney Productions to bring suit against Sony. Their action claims that Sony is infringing copyright law by advertising and offering for sale a device that records TV programming for later viewing. In effect, the lawsuit questions the public's right to record off the air for its private pleasure without charge. Since the airwaves are public property, that right would seem to be self-evident. Disney and MCA intend to argue otherwise. Since they cannot sue every owner of a home video recorder, they are striking at the company that pioneered the technology.

Perhaps not entirely by coincidence, MCA (in conjunction with North American Philips) is a proponent of one of the two unborn videodisc systems. It has been suggested that the MCA-Disney lawsuit may have been instigated in hopes of stalling the nascent videotape boom until the troubled videodisc can finally make its belated debut. And that brings us back to where we started: the nonappearance this fall of those long-awaited records filled with sight as well as sound.