

POET AS EXECUTANT

FOUR QUARTETS. T. S. Eliot. Read by the author (H.M.V. C. 3598-3603).

To say that these records must be disappointing even to a listener who approaches them with no high expectation is not to dismiss them or wish they had not been made. For consider the fact: here for posterity is a rendering of some of the indubitably great poetry of our time by the poet himself. And the rendering, as I shall suggest, has some significance for criticism. That, however, is not because of any direct illumination it throws on the poetry. It brings home to us, indeed, how good the verse is; but it does so by not teaching us anything about the rhythms—anything we didn't know already from the printed page. The printed page tells us how they go: the verse is so marvellously exact.

Mr. Eliot, if a great composer, is not a great, or good, or even a tolerable executant. His voice, as he uses it, is disconcertingly lacking in body. One wouldn't wish him to elocute in the manner of Mr. Robert Speaight (whose actor's declamation of Mr. Eliot's verse empties it), but a capacity for some strength of tone is clearly desirable. Mr. Eliot's reading is of course not unintelligent and insensitive in the actor's way, but it is not positively intelligent and sensitive in the way one would have expected of the poet himself. Judged by that standard it is unintelligent. His command of inflexion, intonation and tempo—his *intention*, as performer, under these heads—is astonishingly inadequate. He seems to be governed by a mechanical routine—to be unable to reduce his *clichés* (which suggest the reading of the Lessons) to a sensitive responsiveness.

As for the critical significance of this rendering, with its curious inadequacies, I think they can be related to the striking contrast offered by his later prose to his poetry. In his poetry he applies to himself a merciless standard; it is the product of an intense and single-minded discipline—discipline for sincerity and purity of interest. In his prose he seems to relax from the asceticism he undergoes as composer of verse. The prose-writer belongs to an external social world, where conventions are formidable and temptations are not only often not resisted, they seem not to be perceived. The reader of the poetry would seem to be more intimately related to the prose-writer than to the poet.

These records should call attention to the problem of reading *Four Quartets* out. The problem deserves a great deal of attention, and to tackle it would be very educational.

F.R.L.

NOTE.—W. H. Mellers' 'Music Chronicle' has had to be held over to the next issue.

COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

RECORDS

DELIUS: *Song of the High Hills*, (R.P.O. conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham. H.M.V.).

BERLIOZ: *Symphonie Fantastique* (Hallé Orchestra conducted by John Barbirolli. H.M.V.).

BERLIOZ: *Three Pieces from the Damnation of Faust*, and *Trojan March* (The Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, conducted by Eduard van Beinum. Decca).

SZYMANOWSKI: *Notturmo* and *Tarantella* for violin and piano (Ida Haendel. Decca).

DEBUSSY: *Ondine* and *Les Tierces Alternées*, *La Terrasse des Audiences du Clair de lune* and *General Lavine*, from *Preludes Book 2*. (Robert Casadesus. Columbia).

The recording of *Song of the High Hills* is an important issue, both mechanically and aesthetically. Though not so consistently impressive as *Sea Drift*, the work is perhaps the most quintessential of Delius's compositions; it is interesting to compare its representative significance with that of Sibelius's *Tapiola*, which I discussed in a recent issue of *Scrutiny*. The climaxes seem at times rather synthetic—they have, at this date, a curiously and inappropriately Elgarian flavour; but there are passages, notably the first entry of the chorus and the conclusion, which I'm inclined to think are the most beautiful and sensitive passages in all Delius's work. Beecham's performance is justly celebrated; and the recording does justice to the richness of the music's texture and scoring.

The Berlioz pieces are not representative of the composer's finest work. The symphony is his first mature creation; and the extracts from *Faust* are slight movements which suffer, too, by being divorced from their context. Barbirolli's performance of the symphony is magnificently vital; but I do not think he fully understands the classical origins of Berlioz's work, and in particular his derivation from Gluck. The recording is good, but not up to the level of the Decca recording. The *Faust* pieces are superbly played and reproduced, and are admirably tractable on small gramophones.

Szymanowski is an interesting composer whose work could well be better known to the gramophone public. It is thus a pity that Decca should have chosen to re-record a work which already exists in a satisfactory version by Menuhin, and which is in any case hardly worthy of the composer's talents. There are some imaginative noises in the *Notturmo*; but the *Tarantella* sounds like an uglified version of Wieniawski. It is most expertly performed by Ida Haendel.

The Casadesus recordings are the most sympathetic Debussy playing I have heard in a long time; and they have the advantage that the pieces are seldom included in recital programmes.

W.H.M.

Several important recordings of eighteenth-century music are held over, and will be discussed in a *Music Chronicle* devoted mainly to music of this period, in the next issue.

