

Berlioz: Symphonie fantastique; Roman Carnival Overture. Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam; Eduard van Beinum, conductor. Richmond R-23205. \$3.98.

For admirers of Eduard van Beinum or for those who wonder about his art or about the state of the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam in the early 1950's, as well as for anyone who wishes to try the Berlioz Symphonie fantastique as "absolute" music, this record is an excellent choice. The symphony was originally issued in both Great Britain and the U.S. early in 1952 (the date of recording is not given on the label or in the notes, which are entirely devoted to the music, by the way) and succeeded the same forces' 78-rpm recording which was issued in 1947, in Great Britain as Decca K-1626-31 and in the U.S. in Decca set EDA-56 and London set LA-111, apparently briefly available dubbed onto long-play London LLP-35. The respected status of the later issue, which spent about two years in the Gramophone Classical Catalogue as the only listing for the symphony on long play, is indicated by favorable to enthusiastic reviews, uninterrupted presence in the catalogues (first as Decca LXT-2642, then as Ace of Clubs ACL-27, and since 1970 - hence the P 1970 on the Richmond label, I presume - with the overture added, as Eclipse ECS-561, the British equivalent of this Richmond issue), and a life of over sixteen years in Schwann (first on London LLP-489, then on Richmond B-19010). So far as I can determine this recording of the overture, issued originally on British Decca LW-5176 in 1955, is making its U.S. debut. It is a pleasant bonus, beautifully played and very well recorded but interpreted rather tamely in comparison with the famous and exciting recording by Victor de Sabata and the London Philharmonic, which I among others consider the standard for this work (originally British Decca K-1552, currently available on Richmond in set RS-62022).

As a long-time enthusiast of Berlioz's music, most of which seems best perceived as single or multiple dramatic pictures, I thought at first that I could not accept van Beinum's relatively undramatic and certainly non-French-sounding interpretation. However, the conductor and this marvelous orchestra perform so well this "absolute"-music approach that it works beautifully -- I haven't been "converted", but I certainly enjoyed this performance and consider it valid. The "Valse", which I always play first since it seems a touchstone for performances of the whole work, goes gracefully with an elegant sense of dance and a mellow middle section; although it seems very slow, it only runs about twenty seconds longer than the other versions played for comparison. No repeats are taken in this or the other versions to be mentioned. The bells in the last movement deserve an award. Otherwise it seems unnecessary to comment on a performance of this quality.

The sound is outstanding for its time; the principal deficiency which connoisseurs of today's finest achievements will notice is the constriction in dynamic range. Without access to any of the earlier issues of this recording, I can't make comparisons except to comment that early Richmonds, pressed in the U.S., are not usually desirable.

This issue, however, pressed in Great Britain, has been well prepared; the review copy had excellent surfaces, an important attribute in view of the fairly low level of mastering.

Comparative listening involved the 78's of van Beinum with the same orchestra, a performance much the same in concept as the one under review but somewhat more dramatic, especially in the final movement, recorded with the excellence characteristic of Decca in the later era of 78's. I also took advantage of the chance to hear again the recording which remains my favorite for this work, that by Pierre Monteux and the San Francisco Symphony (RCA Victor LM-1131). Although this orchestra can't match the Concertgebouw in standard of performance, it plays its considerable best in French style for Monteux, who achieves a reading full of drama. Compared to van Beinum's, Monteux's "Valse" sounds considerably drier and seems to rush headlong (though it's only 23 seconds shorter), his "Marche" is full of menace, and his conclusion is thrilling. In the case of all movements except the "Valse", I was fascinated to discover that Monteux achieves these effects in performances of significantly greater duration than those of the Dutch conductor; Monteux was a master of musical effects of all sorts, easily able to achieve acceleration of excitement with or without resort to increase of speed. The dramatic qualities of this stylistically French performance emerge clearly through a recording deficient in bass and dynamic contrast, one that has much less clarity and considerably more distortion than Decca's.

To conclude, this new Richmond reissue restores to the market a rather unidiomatic but beautifully musical performance, in excellent sound for its age. The memory of Eduard van Beinum's deservedly famous tenure as conductor of the Concertgebouw Orchestra is superbly commemorated by this release.

Brahms: Concerto in A minor, op. 102. Nathan Milstein, violin; Gregor Piatigorsky, cello; Robin Hood Dell Orchestra of Philadelphia; Fritz Reiner, conductor (recorded June 29, 1951);  
Saint-Saëns: Concerto No. 1 in A minor, op. 33. Gregor Piatigorsky, cello; RCA Symphony Orchestra; Fritz Reiner, conductor (recorded December 7, 1950)  
RCA Victrola AVML-2020. \$3.98.

The best that can be said of this record is that it is a fairly suitable memorial to the art of the great Russian-born cellist Gregor Piatigorsky. It should not be a collector's only record of the two pieces included, much of it distorts the tone of the soloists, and it does nothing positive for Fritz Reiner's reputation as an interpreter.

To begin with the Saint-Saëns, Piatigorsky's expressive and effective interpretation (his marvelous technique needs no comment) is nearly ruined by Reiner's inappropriate handling of the accompaniment; the conductor unfortunately shows no understanding of Saint-Saëns's work or even

of French style in this recording. There is no sense of fun and rather little variety. The orchestral part moves along rather coldly and literally, with passage-work markedly delineated, the worst example being the passage near the end that is marked "Molto allegro", which is so slow and heavy as to sound almost ridiculous. Luckily Piatigorsky's sensitive virtuosity is fairly well audible, though the listener must make allowance for what seems to have been a problem in microphone placement that robs his tone of some of its mellow quality and makes it sound more edgy than that in his version of 1940 with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Frederick Stock (Columbia set X-182 -- I know of no long-play reissue of that version). In that earlier recording the opening section in particular (the whole work in general) is performed more quickly; Stock's appropriate accompaniment and the rather cavernous and distant sound of the orchestral recording allow the cellist's flexible, lovely, easy-sounding performance of this extremely difficult work to be heard easily. The sound of the RCA recording is adequate for its time: somewhat tubby, afflicted with tape hiss, all in all fairly similar to that of the original issue (RCA Victor long-play LM-1187, 45-rpm WDM-1538, both issued 1951); the engineers for the reissue have done their work capably.

To turn to the Brahms, the problem which I said may have been attributable to microphone placement (a friend who is a professional cellist tells me that small variations in this respect can markedly affect the apparent size and quality of tone of the recorded violoncello) is present again. Piatigorsky's tone sounds scrappy and a bit thin, but not all the mellow quality is lost. Poor Nathan Milstein's tone, however, emerges edgy and wiry, especially in the first two movements. At least these problems have been lessened in comparison with the copy of the original issue (RCA Victor LM-1191, 1952) which I sampled, and the sound level has been increased. The balance of soloists and orchestra is adequate, and the sound in general is somewhat muddy and muffled, with the absence of low bass typical of RCA recordings of the period. The pressing seemed good, but the review copy had been scratched by dirt in its liner.

My favorite recorded performance of this work is the one made in 1929 by Casals and Thibaud, both sounding their best, with the sometimes inaccurately played accompaniment of the Pablo Casals Orchestra of Barcelona ably conducted by Cortot. In spite of the wooden, telephone-quality recorded sound, the power and beauty of Brahms's music emerges clearly (for example, a real Andante that sings, lots of contrast, a final movement that is slow compared to others discussed but which feels Vivace nevertheless -- and Brahms indicated Vivace non troppo), at least on the original 78's and on Anthony Griffith's superb transfer to be found in the set The Art of Pablo Casals: HMV RLS-723 (avoid the earlier transfer on Angle COLH-75; one of the worst in its variable series, it somehow makes the originally restricted sound even more muffled and pinched. Seraphim set IC-6043 contains a dub of this performance, but I don't know which transfer was used). Anyone who really likes this marvelous work should own this performance as well as another classic recording: that by Heifetz and Feuermann made in 1939 with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Ormandy (but, some

would say, conducted by their memory of Stokowski). The 1939 recording has been reissued all by itself on RCA Victor LCT-1016, now deleted, fairly well dubbed; and it is currently available in Volume 4 of The Heifetz Collection: RCA ARM4-0945, a transfer which I have not heard). This version, with soloists prominent and rather harshly recorded, is dramatic, brilliant, and as superbly played as one would expect. It is the fastest of the three recordings compared; and with the 1929 version shows (in case anyone needs another example) how well great works can take different kinds of interpretations.

The performance by Milstein and Piatigorsky understandably received mixed reviews in its original issue on RCA Victor long-play LM-1191 and 45-rpm WDM-1609 (RCA has released several performances of this work each spread over a full twelve-inch long-playing disc. The present issue only partially makes up for past excess by changing sides after the second movement and including the Saint-Saëns for a total of 48½ minutes rather than 29½). While Milstein's approach tends a bit in the direction of the constantly brilliant and Piatigorsky's toward greater variety, the two work together quite well; but they are both held rather rigidly to the ground by Reiner's stiff accompaniment. The conductor provides insufficient dynamic contrast, especially in the second movement. His first two movements sound merely efficient; the third is the most successful (and remember that the sound here is less edgy than that on the first side) despite the presence of far more notes in the accompaniment that sound staccato than are so indicated in the score. The Robin Hood Dell Orchestra of Philadelphia plays very well, as one would expect from Reiner's reputation; but I was much disappointed by the pedantic results, which fit so poorly with the soloists' fine work. Richard Freed's program notes are interesting and informative; the liner gives recording dates and timings. Despite many problems this record of the Brahms is preferable in every way except quality of sound to its stereophonic successor, which combines Heifetz, Piatigorsky, and a nearly leaden orchestral accompaniment.

The only way to consider this Victrola release as a whole is as an imperfectly clear idea of a great cellist's art that emerges from a rather inappropriate frame.

RUSSIAN ROMANCES --NINA KOSHETZ. Rachmaninoff: All Things Pass Away, op. 26, no. 15; Loneliness, op. 21, no. 6; Sing Not to Me, O Beautiful Woman, op. 4, no. 4; The Island, op. 14, no. 2; How Sweet the Place, op. 21, no. 7; It Was Yesterday, op. 26, no. 13; Lilacs, op. 21, no. 5; Daisies, op. 38, no. 3; At Night, op. 4, no. 3; To the Children, op. 26, no. 7; Christ is Risen, op. 26, no. 6;  
Tchaikovsky: None but the Lonely Heart, op. 6, no. 6; At the Ball, op. 38, no. 3;  
Arensky-Koshetz: Waltz (all of the foregoing accompanied by Celius Dougherty, piano);  
Traditional Gypsy: Dark Eyes; Sadero: Amuri Amuri (final two accompanied by the singer). International Piano Archives IPA-116. \$7.98.

This important reissue provides examples of the art of a great singer and interpreter in a group of recordings basic for any serious collection which includes Russian songs. Nina Koshetz (1894-1965) was trained as a pianist and then as a singer (her voice teacher in Paris was Felia Litvinne). She had an impressive career in opera as well as in concert and recital both in Russia from 1913 until 1920 and in the United States, France, and elsewhere from 1920 until her farewell in 1939. From 1915, when she began to sing with important Russian composers, a large part of her work was devoted to recitals which included works by, and frequently the participation of, such prominent figures as Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, Grechaninoff, Glazunov, Medtner, Ponce, Ravel, and Varèse. Many of these composers either dedicated works to Nina Koshetz or requested her to perform premieres for them. This information, as well as much more about the singer's career, is provided by Francis Crociata's interesting notes for the release. Unfortunately, however, no texts, translations, or even summaries of texts are provided, a serious drawback in view of many American music lovers' unfamiliarity with Russian.

These recordings were made for G. Schirmer & Company, Inc., presumably in New York City, in 1939 and seem originally to have been released in 1941: the Rachmaninoff songs as Set no. 16 (4 discs) and the other items as singles nos. 5512 and 5513. This issue preserves the playing order of the Schirmer Rachmaninoff set, unlike the long-deleted Veritas dubbing of the same material (VM-113). The original recordings, even when found in excellent condition, sound shrill, unresonant, and poorly and variably balanced; the Veritas issue seems considerably worse: either muffled or fuzzy, with rather less bass than the 78's and considerable noise present, all in all an unfortunate job of dubbing and equalization. For the IPA reissue John Kilgore has done an excellent job indeed at taming the peaks and distortions and improving the balance of the recording with no adverse effects to the sound. My only regret is that he evidently had no access to a Packburn for playback of the fine originals used for dubbing; the inevitable (but fortunately rather few, perhaps thanks to the editor's blade) clicks and ticks sound far more prominent than is necessary. However, the ultimate result of what must have been a large amount of hard work is another welcome example of that rare but fortunately increasing species: the long-playing reissue that sounds not only just as good as but even better than the 78-rpm originals.

The matter of sound is particularly important on this release because of the fact that the recordings were made near the end of Nina Koshetz's career. The extremely close perspective and shrillness of sound magnified incipient problems of a voice that was nearing the time for retirement. While Mr. Kilgore's expert work cannot entirely make up for the technical deficiencies of the original recordings, it certainly goes a considerable way toward the provision of a reasonable perspective on the singer's art.

As to that art, its greatness is abundantly clear throughout this collection. Careful repeated listening to these performances reveals Nina Koshetz's attention to all aspects of music and text from the overall outline to the subtlest details of dynamics, rhythms, shadings, and

words and her superb ability to combine the results of that attention into marvelously convincing performances. Only occasionally is there a sign of effort from a voice past its prime. The Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky songs in the collection tend toward feelings of loneliness or regret, thoughts of past or unrequited love, and various sorts of nostalgia; four of the Rachmaninoff works involve evocations of the beauties of nature. The singer's performances present the appropriate mood or the dramatic variations of feeling to full effect. For example, in "Sing Not to Me" she makes striking the contrast between the weary resistance of the subject to the exotic memories stirred and the dramatic vividness of the reminiscence. Colorations of tone and subtleties of communication by rhythmic and dynamic shaping make memorable pictures of such songs as "The Island", "How Sweet the Place", "Lilacs", and "Daisies" (which is from op. 38, a set of songs dedicated to the singer). "At Night" is particularly powerful and passionate; "To the Children" is a marvel of variety in phrasing. Despite the temptation to list many more, these few examples will serve to indicate the authority and stylistic appropriateness of Mme. Koshetz's performances. The listener will find much reward and enjoyment in interpretations of the Rachmaninoff songs which were studied with the composer himself and then developed through nearly the whole of an extensive career of recitals before the recordings were made. It is fascinating to note the similarities of Nina Koshetz's performance of "Daisies" to that in the composer's recording of his transcription of the work for piano solo (in Victor M-722). Celius Dougherty's accompaniment forms the principal difference between them in the relative reticence of his playing and causes one to wish that examples of the collaboration of singer and composer had been preserved. This comment intends no slight upon Mr. Dougherty's excellent abilities as an accompanist -- his fine reputation was certainly deserved; I suspect that the problem (Mr. Crociata's notes quote comments of the singer) may have derived from insufficient experience of Russian style of performance. Mme. Koshetz's own abilities as a pianist can be heard in her self-accompanied performances of "Dark Eyes" and the Sadero song, which (with the singer's own arrangement of the Arensky "Waltz" accompanied by Mr. Dougherty) serve as superb "encores" in this recital.

The privilege of reviewing this release was enhanced by the opportunity provided to compare these recordings to some of those by other famous singers. Most of this rewarding task served to show either striking similarities of approach or other valid interpretations by artists of either varying temperaments or particularly different vocal qualities from those of Nina Koshetz. Ivan Kozlovsky was impressive in his interpretations (op. 26, no. 15; op. 14, no. 2; op. 21, no. 7; with orchestra), though his spectacularly floated and long-held high note in "How Sweet the Place" is nearly enough to make one forget the song for the singer. In her Rachmaninoff Society records of seven of these Rachmaninoff songs Maria Kurenko, who seems also to have performed with the composer and who had a lighter voice than Koshetz, tended to sound a bit less dramatic, in spite of basic similarities of approach. Oda Slobodskaya ("How Sweet the Place" and "Lilacs"), Maxim Karolik ("Christ is Risen"), John McCormack ("To the Children"), Antonina Nezhdanova ("Lilacs" and "Sing Not to Me"), Dmitri Smirnov ("Lilacs"), and

Medea Mei-Figner (Tchaikovsky's "At the Ball") made classic recordings; those of the last three songs mentioned are available on OASI-598, thanks to Mrs. Artsay. Nina Koshetz herself recorded the two Tchaikovsky songs acoustically for Brunswick (10137 or 15029) -- these performances are fascinatingly extravagant. All of these great singers increase the listener's appreciation of the qualities of the songs. It is fortunate that some of the recordings are available, for anyone seriously interested in the music should have as many of them as possible.

As Philip L. Miller has said in the American Record Guide, "The four-disc [Schirmer] album was a landmark as the 'First important representation on records of Rachmaninoff as a song writer.'" Not every important recorded performance is enjoyable; collectors are lucky indeed that the careful work devoted to the technical difficulties of this collection has minimized its shortcomings. All the recordings of Nina Koshetz have been, most deservedly, eagerly sought collectors' items for many years and have thus been difficult and expensive to obtain. To have this group of them made so readily and effectively available is indeed an event of major importance both for the opportunity to appreciate the superb music performed and for the chance to study the art of a great musician.

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