

AN ERA'S END

by David Hall

Edward Robert Lewis 1900-1980

James Grayson 1897-1980

Dario Soria 1912-1980

John Culshaw 1925-1980

Between them, these four remarkable personages sum up much of the finest that came out of the art, science, and business of commercial sound recording and publication bounded by the advent of the "LP" disc in 1948 and the imminent coming to market in 1980 of the video disc, carrying both visual and audio information content. Here we also must call to mind the singular contributions of Columbia's Goddard Lieberson (1911-1977) and of EMI's Walter Legge (1906-1979).

Only days before his death Sir Edward Lewis saw the takeover of the Decca Record Company, which he had brought to worldwide eminence from parlous beginnings in 1928, by the Polygram international record company conglomerate. The initial impetus provided in the 1930's by English Decca's successes in the popular record field -- Bing Crosby et al -- provided the foundation for the firm's later achievements in the classical music era. The work on submarine detection devices by Decca chief engineer, Arthur Haddy, during World War II eventually became metamorphosed into the ffrr (full frequency range recording) 78 rpm shellac disc, merchandised initially in this country by American Decca with British pressings and American packaging, but subsequently by the parent firm's American subsidiary, London Records. When the "LP" came to pass in 1948, London wasted no time in following Columbia's lead, marketing its product in the U.S. in advance of its Decca release in Britain. English Decca likewise was in the forefront of stereo disc developments, and though it had worked out its own vertical-lateral version in 1957, quickly went along with the international industry in opting for the 45/45 cut. Together with Arthur Haddy in Lewis's firm was a highly gifted musician-producer in his early thirties, John Culshaw, who up to that time had been best known for an excellent book on the life and music of Sergei Rachmaninov. Beginning with the production of Das Rheingold in 1958 with Georg Solti conducting the Vienna Philharmonic with a stellar cast, there came into being perhaps the grandest achievement of the recording art up to that time -- a first complete and integral commercial recording of the Wagner Ring cycle, produced with an attention to detail and dramatic verisimilitude unmatched previously and very seldom surpassed since; and though Culshaw's fame has stemmed from his Ring achievement, his superb productions of Benjamin Britten and Richard Strauss are no less memorable in their fashion. Not only has Culshaw's premature passing at the age of

fifty-five a cause for the most poignant regret, but so too is that fact that following his departure from English Decca in 1967, he never again was able to apply his talents to recording production with a comparable degree of concentration and intensity.

Dario Soria died "with his boots on," working at the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound on the master tape for a Metropolitan opera luxury packaging of one of its historic broadcasts, this one being Un Ballo in maschera. Opera was Soria's great love, specifically the opera of his native Italy, when he fled to the U.S. in 1939 with the anti-Semitic pressures of the Mussolini regime becoming ever more disagreeable. A stint with the O.W.I. followed by executive production work at CBS and with a major advertising agency was accompanied immediately after World War II by the importation of Italian Cetra 78 rpm discs that brought with them the voices of Maria Callas, Ferruccio Tagliavini, Gabriella Gatti, Cesare Siepi, not to mention Victor de Sabata's extraordinarily dramatic recorded performance of the Mozart Requiem. The Cetra-Soria firm was Johnny-on-the-spot when the "LP" came in, and with the 1951 Verdi anniversary celebrations, Dario Soria staged a virtual one-label Verdi revival by issuing on Cetra-Soria LP's over a seven-year period no less than sixteen complete Verdi operas including such forgotten items as La Battaglia di Legnano and Un Giorno di Regno. With Cetra-Soria being sold to Capitol, there came next the move to EMI, which had severed its long-standing ties with RCA Victor and Columbia and was establishing its own U.S. label with the oldest trademark in this business, that of the recording Angel. Not satisfied to be marketing beautifully-produced recorded performances of England's Philharmonia Orchestra, not to mention such stellar names as Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Sir Thomas Beecham, and the whole galaxy of EMI artists, Soria in collaboration with his brilliant and gifted wife, Dorle, put out some of the most luxurious and handsomely illustrated packages in the history of the business. In 1961 came a move to RCA Victor and a continuation of the luxury packaging concept under the Soria Series imprint. By 1970 Soria took over as managing director of the Metropolitan Opera Guild, and not the least among the many enterprises in which he was involved, there was the production of recordings with the attendant distinctive Soria-style packaging from historic Metropolitan Opera broadcasts for sale to those donating \$100 or more to the Met. Ponselle's Carmen from 1937 and the Pinza-Rethberg Le Nozze di Figaro are among the choicer items in point.

Like Dario Soria, London-born James Grayson came into recording rather late in a business career that had brought him to the U.S. early in World War II to help with food shipments to Britain. After the War, in partnership with Michael Naida and Henry Gage, he founded Westminster Records, an operation developed from the then wholly new technology of cutting "LP" acetate masters from edited magnetic tape, with most of the original recording production emanating from Vienna, and pressing being done over here by Columbia. In those days -- 1949-1956 -- one could produce finished recordings of first-rate classical repertoire with excellent artists for almost nothing. Having arrived on the "LP" scene early with buyers of the new discs crying for repertoire, Westminster in some four

years built up a catalog of more than two hundred items ranging from a complete Triumphs of Oriana madrigal sequence with the David Randolph Singers to a Vienna-recorded Kondaly Te Deum. By the early 1960's there were over a thousand items in the catalog and the names of conductor Hermann Scherchen, pianists Paul Badura-Skoda and Jorg Demus, harpsichordist Fernando Valenti (he of the Domenico Scarlatti marathon), and 'cellist-conductor Antonio Janigro had become household names and sounds among the new breed of record collector. Needless to say, Westminster not only was in the vanguard of the baroque revival; but there was also ambitious comprehensive projects undertaken, such as the Schubert quartet cycle with the Vienna Konzerthaus Quartet. Of the important "major independents" spawned by early "LP" technology, Westminster came up with a far better than average combination of varied repertoire and excellent quality recorded performance. With the advent of stereo and the drying up of inexpensive sources for first-rate recorded performance of classical repertoire, Westminster's days as an independent operation became numbered during the 1960's; but for those of us who grew up with "LP", Westminster was a singularly important facet of the disc scene of the 1950's. In any event, it was James Grayson, working out of the recording facilities that he maintained at Vienna's Konzerthaus until well into the 1970's who, together with the late Kurt List (1913-1970) handled the bulk of the Westminster A & R work and catalog development.

What is of greatest importance about each and every one of the personages mentioned herein is that every one of them loved their work, art, and craft and were dedicated beyond considerations of merely turning a fast buck. Above all, they knew and cared about their field. Whether they represent the last of a breed or not is hard to say at this juncture; but New Yorker film critic Pauline Kael, writing in the June 23, 1980 issue, sounds a cautionary note that surely has its application to the major record labels insofar as present trends are concerned: "Part of what has deranged American life in this past decade is the change in book publishing and in magazines and newspapers and in the movies as they have passed out of the control of those whose lives were bound up in them and into the control of conglomerates, financiers, and managers who treat them as ordinary commodities. ...There are certain kinds of business in which the public interest is more of a factor than it is in the manufacture of neckties. Book publishing, magazines and newspapers, movies and television and live theatre--these are businesses, of course, but traditionally the people that work in them have felt privileged (by birth or ability or talent or luck, or by a combination of these factors). That has been true not only of the actors and journalists but of the entrepreneurs and the managers. There have always been a few businessmen in these fields who had the sensibility of artists (without the talent or drive); if they had a good critical sense and a generous nature, they were appreciators and didn't resent them."

I for one would like to think that certain of the small independent labels that have come into being within the past five years, many of them distributing through audiophile channels or merchandising by direct mail products of extraordinary technical and often outstanding musical quality,

will provide the positive answers for those of us who still care about sound recordings as genuine artifacts and meaningful documents as opposed to mere commodities.