

GINETTE NEVEU: The Complete Recorded Legacy. EMI RLS 737 (Four discs, mono; from originals recorded 1938-48). £ 13.95.

It is rather sobering to realize that, were she still alive and performing today, Ginette Neveu would be 61 years old. Mlle. Neveu, an astonishing child prodigy, attracted international recognition in 1935 when she won first prize at the Wieniawski Competition in Warsaw, edging out David Oistrakh, her senior by twelve years. Her brilliant and promising career came to a sudden and tragic end on October 28, 1949 when she and her talented older brother Jean were killed in an air crash (the same disaster that also claimed the life of boxer, Marcel Cerdan). This poignant anthology brings together for the first time all of Neveu's issued commercial recordings. Few music lovers will want to pass it by.

Heard on LP for the first time are the various encore pieces and one major work--the Richard Strauss Sonata in E flat, Op. 18--that Neveu, still in her teens, recorded in Berlin for EMI's German affiliate Electrola. Also included are first microgroove transfers of additional short works from London sessions held in March and August of 1946. The remaining items have all been previously available as dubbings--the Brahms Concerto in France on COLH 80; the Sibelius Concerto and Suk Four Pieces in England on ALP 1479; the Chausson Poème, Debussy Sonata and Ravel Tzigane on ALP 1520--(the two British HMV discs also at one time issued in America as Angels 35129 and 35128, respectively). But these new transfers are incomparably superior to the old: the metal parts no longer survive of certain sides and those consequently had to be transcribed from ordinary shellac 78 r.p.m. pressings with occasionally obtrusive surface noise. Otherwise the presence is substantially greater than before and the increased brightness, impact and volume often has the uncanny effect of transforming long cherished, faded pages of sentimental value into miraculously resurrected living experiences that can be readily savored and enjoyed. Indeed, the fidelity of most of these aging recordings--of the 1939 Berlin-made Strauss sonata, particularly--is little short of miraculous: the violin line is soaring and luminous, the piano clinging and plangent, its bass notable for its velvety retention; and both instruments are heard, moreover, in ideal ratio.

I find the early Berlin-made performances particularly interesting. They reveal an already formidable violinistic command and a musical personality that impresses as more lyrical and vulnerable than the overpowering motor energy familiar in Neveu's work a few years later. Her 1938 renditions of the Chopin-Rodionov Nocturne in C sharp minor and the second and third of Suk's Four Pieces, Op. 17 fascinatingly differ from her later recordings of these same vignettes. In the Suk, her youthful readings--while full of feeling and elan--cannot equal the blunt, driving angularity and more mature expression of her 1946 account of all four of these character pieces. But the early Chopin has a warmth and feminine spontaneity that makes it, for me at least, even more special and captivating than the noble, grandiose 1946 reading. And I do not expect to encounter a more apropos statement of the rhapsodic, early Strauss work (superbly partnered by Gustav Beck). Also played at these early sessions

were the famed Gluck Melodie from Orfeo, the Paradis-Dushkin Sicilienne (with the composer's name misspelled "Paradies"!), and two of the Fritz Kreisler "discoveries" (one of them still incorrectly identified, as in 1938, as "W.F. Bach--arr. Kreisler: Air"; the other as "Tartini--arr. Kreisler: Variations on a Theme of Corelli.") While one might wonder what a nice girl like Neveu was doing in a place like the Berlin of the late 1930s, these recordings leave no doubt of the artist's caliber, or of the expertise of Electrola's technicians.

Having thus established my estimate of Neveu as one of the greatest violinists of her--or any other--generation, I'd like to tackle the attendant problem of reviewing a legend. For the last thirty-one years, Mlle. Neveu has been canonized as Saint Ginette d'Arc, and one criticizes adversely only at a risk of sounding heretical. Years ago, when I expressed some disaffection with the Neveu/Susskind Sibelius Concerto, readers of High Fidelity wrote letters to express their displeasure. I find it interesting that Sir Neville Cardus wrote an article in condemnation of a German critic who had the audacity to question Neveu's performance of the Sibelius at the 1949 Edinburgh Festival. The maligned critic had implied that Neveu was bent on conquering, not communicating, and, noting that she and orchestra were often out of sync, had the temerity to suggest that perhaps she wasn't listening to her accompaniment. Sir Neville's article, written partly as a memorial for Neveu immediately in the aftermath of her death, dismissed the critic as mean-spirited and incompetent. But, rehearing the recorded version of the Sibelius, I am again forced to take note of a fleeting moment of uneasy ensemble in the finale, and of certain slightly willful, even arbitrary, idiosyncracies in her interpretation. Certainly, her tempo for the third movement sounds excessively dogged. And one occasionally discovers similar fussy details of phrasing in a few of her other performances as well (in the Dinicu-Heifetz Hora Staccato, which she effectively keeps from soaring). This type of sectionalization is not at all uncommon to distinguished youthful performers who have temperament to impress--and the discipline to impress it with: one found similar traits in some of Cantelli's early readings. Cantelli, however, let the music flow more easily in later years (his 1953 Mathis der Maler, and later readings of Moussorgsky-Ravel Pictures at an Exhibition were freer than his commercial recordings made in 1950 and 1951, respectively), and perhaps Neveu, too, would have moved in that direction.

It is altogether possible that Neveu might have been unconsciously compensating in the Sibelius for conductor Susskind's lack of a passion and commitment commensurate with her own. Barring that one unfortunate instant in the third movement, the Philharmonia--then a brand new recording orchestra--plays smoothly and cleanly but without the vibrancy one looks for in this music. With the sound improved, and details now coming through admirably, the performance seems far better than it once did. Would that we could have heard Neveu, even at that early stage of her career, playing this concerto under a really strong conductor like Sir Thomas Beecham...

The readings of the Brahms Concerto and Chausson Poeme, both immeasurably benefiting from Issay Dobrowen's vital, structured leadership, give point to my hypothesis: with a strong "counter-pull" coming from the podium, Neveu's dynamic energy is harnessed and her phrasing becomes simpler, more economical. The Brahms is dispatched with lofty assurance--Heifetz-like composure allied to Szigeti-like eloquence and involvement. This is definitely "modern-school" violin playing, with a taut, focused attack and a minimum of sliding. But the thrusting incisiveness is warmed by a burning emotional sincerity and a burnished viola-like alto tone quality. The Chausson, though of course completely different in its aesthetic demands, similarly thrives on the Neveu/Dobrowen blend of ironclad, tensile classicism and a fierce eroticism that threatens to burst the bonds of reason but never does. While the 1946 sound is, of course, somewhat dated (the oboe tone, forwardly miked, is unpleasantly acerbic in the Brahms; tuttis in both scores, while robust, are relatively constricted), it is even now more than adequate in conveying the dynamism of these incomparable readings. Joachim's cadenza is played in the Brahms first movement, incidentally.

The tigress in Neveu also leaps upon us in Ravel's fiercely virtuosic Tzigane (a speciality of the violinist since the days of her 1935 Wieniawski win) and in Falla's Danza Española from La Vida Breve. It is particularly fascinating to compare the Neveu interpretation of the Falla with that of Fritz Kreisler, who made the arrangement: Kreisler drenches the music with Viennese sunlight; Neveu bathes it in molten lava, giving it a quintessentially Spanish fervor (her G string sound has a particularly mean glint).

Jean Neveu became his sister's accompanist in 1942 and is of course heard in all of the postwar recordings without orchestra (the Tzigane is played in its original form with piano). Their last recording together, Debussy's Sonata in G minor, has a valedictory distinction: in place of the wispy gossamer usually offered in this elusive and (still) controversial score, the Neveus give it a spacious, boldly substantial reading. The needed delicacy is there, to be sure, but the brilliantly precise effects are stated with tangible passion and healthy firmness of outline. The playing is as "French" as Casadesus/Francescatti, but more robust; as brilliant as Heifetz/Bay but (unlike their's) not hard and varnished; as sensuous as Elman/Mittman, but with something of the intellectual rigor heard from Szigeti/Bartók.

Brian Crimp's essay reminds us that Neveu's art, by her own recognition, entered a new phase of maturity during the last year of her life. But fate denied her the time to make any further recordings. She was scheduled for sessions that would have produced the Beethoven and Tchaikovsky concertos as well as all three Brahms sonatas with Edwin Fischer at the piano but didn't live to make any of them. Since Neveu performed extensively right up to the time of her demise, it is altogether possible that transcriptions exist of some of these last performances. Dinu Lipatti's meagre discography was fortunately augmented with such transcriptions and posterity is all the richer for having such superb performances of concertos by Bach (D minor), Mozart (C major, K. 467), and

Chopin (E minor)--not to mention the revealingly divergent accounts of the Schumann (Ansermet's framework produced a very different sort of interpretation than is heard on the commercial recording with Karajan) and all the solo works heard in the final Besancon recital. The time is long overdue for an analogous gesture in Neveu's behalf, and perhaps the success of this tribute will furnish an incentive.

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Note: Neveu performed the Beethoven Concerto in Europe with Karajan and Barbirolli, and in America with Ormandy and Szell; she played the Brahms with Koussevitzky/B.S.O. in 1947, and appeared on a Sunday N.Y. Philharmonic broadcast in January 1949, performing both the Chausson Poème and the Ravel Tzigane. Informed sources have reported the existence of a Neveu Beethoven with Hans Rosbaud, and of a Brahms with Schmidt-Isserstedt. And the Chausson, Debussy and Ravel are now available by themselves on Pathé Marconi 2 C 051-03982.

BRAHMS: Piano Works

Yves Nat, piano. EMI Pathé Marconi 2C 051-16400, (mono) Recorded in October 1955. Intermezzi (3), Op. 117; Rhapsodies (2), Op. 79; Variations on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24.

Yves Nat, one of the great French keyboard stylists and a member of the generation between Cortot (born 1877) and Robert Casadesu (1899), ended his virtuoso performing career in 1934 to devote the last twenty-two years of his life to pedagogy. The present Brahms anthology was recorded shortly before his death in August 1956.

Listened to in its proper context, the disc provides valuable insights into music that, traditionally, is supposed to go against the French grain. Superficial listeners, used to cosmetic opulence--both pianistically and sonically--will be disturbed by the tinny, unalluring constriction that makes the more massive parts of the Handel Variations distinctly hard toned and petulant (the pastel shadings of the shorter works overside make a more pleasant impression), and by myriad digital unevennesses (caused, I would guess, more by lack of rigorous practice than by declining health; some difficult sections are surprisingly accurate and rhythmically sprinting).

These performances, then, are not for the casual collector. But in its way, Nat's playing is revelatory. Firstly, it is arrow straight in its structural elucidation: at every turn of phrase, the listener is made to know where he is by the pianist's clearheaded harmonic awareness and by a predominance of tempos much brisker than those normally taken. Secondly, there is a wonderfully luminous, singing quality that, at the same time, absolutely disdains mawkish sentimentality. And finally, one finds a unique mixture of symphonic distance and clavichord intimacy. Brahms the Classicist is thus ideally served by an "overview" that admits a modicum of lapidarian detail. Even when the fingers fail, or when the technicians in the control room compress, the music's basic outlines are guided by a superior, sophisticated mind.

While unorthodox details are too numerous to fully catalogue here, a few in the Variations will serve to illustrate my point: the scales linking the sections of Variation I are played freely, like banners unfurling; Variation X is given a tumultous, almost scampering quality; Variation XIII is played rather steadily, with the left handed arpeggiations strummed like a serenading troubadour; and the alla musetta Variation XXII is played much more dramatically than usually, with an enormous crescendo of intensity in the middle and an equally noteworthy return to quieter dynamic at the end. This Handel Variations will not supersede such technically superior readings as Rudolf Serkin (CBS M 35177) and Fleisher (Odyssey Y 35920; an emasculated transfer with insufficient bass impact), but the two Op. 79 Rhapsodies and (especially) the three Op. 117 Intermezzos are thoroughly exalted in Nat's performances.

CHOPIN: Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 2, in F minor, Op. 21;  
Fantasy in F minor, Op. 49. Witold Malcuzyński, piano; London Symphony  
Orchestra, Walter Susskind, cond. E.M.I. Trianon 2C 027 00915.

Witold Malcuzyński, who died only a few years ago, had the misfortune of being a Paderewski disciple when his mentor's name no longer exerted its erstwhile Midas-like hold on the musical public's affections. Malcuzyński was an interpreter with a penchant for the grand line and, sometimes, little concern for smaller, lapidarian details. His technique, while never exactly spotless, was proficient enough to storm the big citadels of high romantic virtuosity in a communicative, free-wheeling manner. This Polish-born artist limited himself to certain specialized areas and--unless I am mistaken--avoided Bach, Mozart and Beethoven (but not Brahms; there is a recording of the Handel Variations and two of the D minor Concerto, all of which are reasonably distinguished).

Herewith is the last recording Malcuzyński made of the Chopin F minor Concerto, a recording first issued in 1960 on the domestic Angel label (an earlier account--with Paul Kletzki leading the Philharmonia Orchestra--was issued in America, first by Columbia and later, by Angel; I mistakenly assumed at one time that those were separate performances). An earlier version of the Fantasy, initially released on 78 r.p.m., was coupled with the older version of the concerto in its Angel edition and the present account joined that work on the 1960 Angel as it does here.

The pressing under review originates from France and boasts sound vastly superior to its original Angel counterpart. In 1960, Angel, having recently transferred production of its product to American industry, had fallen upon dismal times in terms of mastering and pressing proficiency. The occasional patch of faulty balance remains on the new pressing (the piano blots out relevant orchestral details in parts of the finale), but otherwise the tone is fuller, more luminous than before, and infinitely more impressive in conveying a wide dynamic panorama without serious distortion problems. The pianist's tone remains on the woolly, opaque side--more akin to Arthur Rubinstein's sonority than to Josef Hofmann's watercolor brushstrokes or to Lipatti's pastels; and without that certain luminosity to the sound that all three of those pianists produced--but there is sweep and communicative appeal, not to mention incontestible authority, to the playing. The Fantasy, spaciously conceived and granitic in its thrust, is of a piece interpretively with the concerto, and such a style suits this ruminative, later period work even better than it does the youthful concerto with its graceful filigree. The tuttis in the concerto, incidentally, are played without the cuts inflicted on them in the version with Kletzki.

Rehearing these performances after a long interim, and with such vastly upgraded sonics, drives home the conviction that Malcuzyński was sadly underrated.

LISZT: Lez Préludes (\*); SCHUBERT: Symphony No. 8, in B minor, D. 758 (Unfinished) (\*); SMETANA: Vltava (The Moldau) (\*\*). Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (\*); Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (\*\*), Andre Cluytens, cond. E.M.I. Trianon TRI 33169.

The Belgian conductor, André Cluytens, became infamous for his drab, low-keyed, "correct" performances of French music--but some of the blame might be put at the feet of the indifferent playing of the Parisian ensembles taking part in those recordings (nothing can be more deadly than French orchestras playing French music--unless it is the Viennese with their proprietary, pretentious tricks in Viennese music!).

Actually, Cluytens was a solid, expert interpreter and his vindication may be found in his performances of standard repertory with great aggregations such as the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics and London Philharmonia (his integral set of the Nine Beethoven Symphonies on Seraphim, and his remake of the Berlioz Fantastique, never issued in America, are cases in point to put alongside the present anthology--similarly unfamiliar to American ears).

The Liszt and Smetana are particularly fine. The compact timpany sound is a help to the Préludes, the Berlin player obviously using the hard sticks preferred by Music Director Karajan. This tone poem, so often bathed in bathos, emerges in a muscular, expressive, unsentimental manner--cleanly drawn phrases stated in rich sonorities and unhurried clarity. The interpretation is midway between the tense extroversion of Paray and the pretentious Wagnerian inflation of Furtwängler. It reminds this listener of a similarly hearty Monteux/Boston recording on an early 1950s RCA Victor disc, though without quite the earthiness of that version. (Nor does it have quite the vitality and intensity of Mengelberg's antique interpretation--which many now find unpleasantly capricious.)

Vltava flows along sweetly and energetically, and my only question here (not even a quibble) is the exaggeratedly genial tempo taken in the wedding-dance episode. The final pages are sonorous and impressive, and prove that these fanfares "sound" even without Toscanini's (judicious) emendations.

The Schubert, while lovingly played, is a bit bland and pale of characterization. Along with the songfulness, this hackneyed but extraordinary work also needs a piercing poignancy and a snarling ferocity (those trombones should be assertive, not merely supportive and mellifluous).

No recording dates are given but the sound (and mastering) is first class.

R. STRAUSS: Dance of the Seven Veils from "Salome"; Don Juan, Op. 20; Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks, Op. 28. Philharmonia Orchestra, Otto Klemperer, cond. HMV Concert Classics SXLP 30298, £ 3.65.

Heard in Angel's drably mastered pressing, these performances tended to sound impossibly lumbering and academic (Salome, in particular, seemed as if she were doing her dance with wooden shoes on!). The effect of this superb new edition is salutary: once again the refurbished sonics belatedly vindicate Klemperer, revealing him as a musician of intellect and passion.

To be sure, these readings--even when heard correctly--will not appeal to all tastes. Klemperer was obviously seeking an intellectualized framework for these pieces and sometimes the escapades of the individual protagonists are subordinated to a kind of abstraction and very steady basic tempi. Surprisingly, this Till--with its incredible profusion of concertante detail and rigidly held down rhythmic steadiness--has points of similarity with Toscanini's 1952 NBC Symphony recording. The RCA mono sound, though, had a sharp, thin clarity which stressed jewel-like balances and steely punctilliousness while E.M.I.'s robust, resonant acoustic tends to generalize the overall effect into a kind of avuncular sturdiness. Don Juan, also broad and Wagnerian in the Toscanini manner, is--admittedly--a bit lethargic (there is an earlier Klemperer version from the late 1920s which I haven't heard; perhaps that account has more of the Don's requisite rakishness). Even so, the breadth and integrity are impressive. The greatest improvement of all can be heard in the tawdry Dance of the Seven Veils which sounds terrifyingly convulsive in Klemperer's grimly immoral statement.

In its way, this is a marvelous record.

Harris Goldsmith