

## HOLLYWOOD STRING QUARTET

THE LEGENDARY HOLLYWOOD STRING QUARTET. Brahms: Quintet in F minor for piano, two violins, viola and cello, Op. 34. Schubert: Quintet in C for two violins, viola and two cellos, Op. posth. 163, D. 956. Smetana: String Quartet No. 1 in E minor, "From my Life." Dvorak: String Quartet No. 12 in F, Op. 96, B. 179, "American." The Hollywood Quartet (Felix Slatkin and Paul Shure, violinists; Paul Robyn, violist [in Brahms and Schubert]; Alvin Dinkin, violist [in Smetand and Dvorak]; Eleanor Aller, cellist); Victor Aller, pianist (in Brahms); Kurt Reher, cellist (in Schubert). EMI-HIS MASTER'S VOICE RLS 765 (HLM 7228-7230, OC 141-86 432-434), 3 records, mono.

Who put this box together remains nameless, but he/she demonstrates etymological carelessness that is atypical of the British, although common enough from American record producers and packagers. A legend is by definition unverifiable. Many an artist or ensemble incautious enough to step before a recording horn or microphone has forfeited any claim to legendariness, and this box certainly verifies anything about the Hollywood Quartet that one might want to verify, short of their stage presence.

The apparat laid in is downright idiotic. It sets forth the standard goo about the music, a precis of the contents (with year of recording only), and very little about the quartet members -- in fact, nada, outside of a flash biography of leader Felix Slatkin and the bare dates of the quartet's life-span.

The performances, spanning 1950 to 1955 (not 1951-55 as on the cover) tell us a great deal. The Brahms Quintet is given a heavily inflected reading, not always with logically placed emphases. As with every other performance recorded here, the ensemble is impeccable, but inner voices are not consistently heard. The piano sound is edgy but dull and lacking in coloration. The recording is close-up and not very resonant, dropping phrase-ends into a void. In spite of these distracting problems, there are many beautifully set out passages along the way. It is unfortunate that they don't add up to a consistent interpretive point of view.

In contrast, the Schubert Quintet is metrically straight as a pin, and as minimally lyrical as it can be construed. In the opening movement, the long-lined subject central to the music is given out with all the rigor of a military march. A residual sumptuousness takes refuge in truly beautiful tone production, but this is a leftover in a disquieting absence of shaping. The remaining movements are negotiated with fractionally greater flexibility, at standard tempos. The earliest recording in this set, this has never before been available in a decent pressing; the earliest of Capitol's LPs tended to be more than a bit noisy of surface.

The quartets of Smetana and Dvorak receive standard readings of energy and tonal elegance, if no trace of sentiment.

I am a little disappointed that EMI has not seen fit to make the point that this group was fairly adventurous in their recorded repertoire, by choosing the G major Quartet of Hummel for reissue -- there is no other LP recording of this engaging piece known to me -- or Erno Dohnanyi's String Quartet No. 3 in A minor, which they performed with a full measure of its implicit comedy.

As a group of Hollywood studio musicians taking a flier at an altogether more idealistic (if less lucrative) enterprise, the members of the Hollywood Quartet acquitted themselves remarkably well. They were by no means the first West Coast-based permanent quartet ensemble, nor did they have much effect on anything outside their immediate performance culture. Thirteen years of existence is not an unusual life-span for such a group. It is in their recordings, and not necessarily those in this collection, that their influence (such as it is) resides. One looks forward to hearing the recorded results of their 1957 Beethoven cycle, given at the Edinburgh Music Festival (now on EMI RLS 7707). These later issues gave me much pleasure when they were new, and I was that much younger. I recall only one annoyance -- a too-distant perspective, if one can use that word of a single-channel recording; how they now stack up as interpreters remains in question.

EMI has done good work, but Capitol's mono sound remains decidedly opaque. The surfaces are not audible.

John D. Wiser

## WALTON'S WALTON

WALTON CONDUCTS WALTON. Symphony No. 1 in B-flat minor; Coronation Marches, Crown Imperial; Orb and Sceptre; Belshazzar's Feast; Suite from Henry V; Spitfire Prelude and Fugue; Facade-Suite; Portsmouth Point, Overture; Johannesburg Festival Overture; Partita for Orchestra; Prelude from Richard III. Donald Bell, baritone; Philharmonia Chorus (in Belshazzar's Feast); Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Sir William Walton. HIS MASTER'S VOICE SLS 5246 (HLM 7231; HLS 7232-3; OC 145-43 181-183, mono/stereo), three records.

For those concerned with such things, the ultimate ranking of Sir William Walton among British composers is not likely to be settled in the near future. While he was not aggressively cosmopolitan in the manner of his shorter-lived contemporary, Constant Lambert, Walton's music unquestionably stems from central European traditions. The individual influences on his musical language are clearly identifiable in it -- Sibelius, Hindemith, even Albert Roussel. In the British tradition, he was not conspicuous for verbal exegeses on the nature and origins of his creative activities.

As a conductor of his own music, Walton had the run of EMI from mid-to late in his career, and the production was voluminous. Much of it was subject to mixed critical commentary when it was new. With this generous reissue before us, the opportunity to refresh rather distant memories has proven quite enlightening to me. For example, it is a great pleasure to hear the opening measures of the Symphony No. 1 arise from inaudibility rather more quickly than previous processings allowed. Subsequent events in listening to this work disperse the earlier impression that the performance lacked contrast and energy, but confirm the overstated quality of the music, particularly in the outer movements. There's certainly no lack of contrast between the remarkably spiky scherzo and the coolly beautiful slow movement. For a single-channel orchestral recording of its time, there's an unusual degree of transparency, confirming the effectiveness of Walton's scoring. The phraseological straightforwardness and rhythmic flexibility of this reading make it more communicative than several more recent recordings.

The other large-scale orchestral work to be found here -- the Partita -- is a more impersonal essay, but its Hindemithian subject matter and relaxed impetus remain persuasive in sheer technical expertise. Neither in detail nor in overall shaping does Walton approach the quality of performance to be found in the Szell/Cleveland Orchestra recording.

Belshazzar's Feast struck me, on first hearing, as almost a parody of the British oratorio tradition. The pomp is very pompous indeed, the noisy sections too noisy, the tension of the unfolding Old Testament tale too broadly supported in the music. Given the twelve-cylinder

nature of the work, the composer's conductorial understatement in this second recording of the piece misfires substantially. It is far too genteel.

The rest is bits and pieces. Facade orchestral suites serve as reminders of staged performances only, however well they are done, and these are as lively and nuanced as one could desire. The snippets of firm music remind one precisely how deeply Hindesmittten the composer was; one keeps drifting east toward Mainz, which is much more strongly evoked than Westminster. Portsmouth Point is a high point among the purely orchestral short works; the Johannesburg Festival Overture is a decidedly empty essay in comparison.

The notes to the set, by one Gilliam Widdicombe, are rather arresting. One suspects the lady has had her leg pulled when she writes that "Walton began composing as a 14-year-old chorister at Christ Church, Oxford (when his voice broke)...It looked as though he would be sent back to the rough local school in Oldham...Oxford was...a paradise he could not bear to leave. He had to make himself 'interesting'. He began composing." And further: "A major technical advance (in Walton's conducting) followed the suggestion, from an orchestral player in Berlin, that he should put his left hand in his pocket".

The Symphony, two coronation marches, Facade and Portsmouth Point are in mono; the remainder are stereo recordings, all originally produced by Walter Legge. Recording dates, venues, and technical personnel are set forth in the printed material accompanying the discs.

While Walton is not always his own best interpreter, the reissue is worth its price for the Symphony No. 1 and Portsmouth Point, recordings of great integrity and spirit that have not been available here in many years.

John Wiser

## MOZART TRIOS

MOZART: LES TRIOS POUR PIANO, VIOLON ET VIOLONCELLE. B flat major (Divertimento), K. 254; D minor, K. 442; G major, K. 496; B flat major, K. 502; E major, K. 542; C major, K. 548; G major, K. 564. Lili Kraus, pianist; Willi Boskovsky, violinist; Nikolaus Hubner, cellist. (Recorded in 1954 by Les Discophiles Francais). EMI REFERENCES (PATHE MARCONI) 2C 151-73052-54, 3 records, mono.

We have heard over and over that Mozart's piano trios are not among his best chamber music. Yet, while these spare-textured essays may lack the profundity of his six string quartets dedicated to Haydn, or the elemental force of the four mature string quintets, they have an imponderably easy flow and no shortage of pleasant invention. The later trios move far from the slavishly accompanied keyboard parts of even the last trios of Joseph Haydn. Possibly all of these works are of more interest to players than to casual auditors; their interplay of parts is not calculated to electrify the latter, but to reinforce the ensemble. Some movements are outstandingly memorable -- the Larghetto of K. 502 and the resplendent little Allegro finale of K. 542.

These performances were recorded from October to December in 1954, first issued by Les Discophiles Francais in 1955, and shortly thereafter appeared in the USA on the Haydn Society label.

The players are identifiably Viennese in orientation (if not necessarily by birth) and their playing is a nominally good example of the tail-end of a performance tradition of long-standing. These performers indulge in moderately short-period rubato, always within rather than across phrases; the string players display a modest indulgence in portamento, never sweeping or in any way exaggerated. They are small-toned and rather inclined to oversweetness. Pianist Kraus is unmistakably the leader, and shows up here to greater advantage than is often the case.

Unfortunately, the quality of recording is widely variable, and some of the best movements are degraded by overmiking -- with a consequent ping in the piano sound and wiriness in the strings. These qualities are purely the result of technical defects in the original taping, imposing tonal characteristics not to be imputed to these musicians. An examination of Haydn Society issues of some of this material disclosed the same defects, along with the expected poor surface quality of a single-channel pressing.

These overridingly lyrical readings are strongly recommended, with appropriate reservations for the defects inherent in the recording process.

John D. Wiser