

THE ANONYMOUS, THE PSUEDONYMOUS, AND THE MISSING:
CONDUCTORS ON RECORD REVISITED

by

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David Hamilton's thoughtful examination of John L. Holmes' ambitious lexicon, Conductors on Record (in A.R.S.C. Journal, Vol. XIV, No. 2) strikes the right balance of criticism and appreciation: "a sound conception, flawed in the execution." The temptation to apply large and irritating doses of hindsight to what is indeed a "monumental compilation" of data on lives and records is great--and if there is anything in which record collectors are unquestionably gifted, it is hindsight. By sampling a letter's work of entries and then scrutinizing those for a few of the giants of the business, Hamilton managed to resist these negative temptations and convey a constructive sense of the problems and the strengths of the enterprise. Also, as he notes, Holmes himself is quite open about his difficulties in gathering information; he graciously invites criticism and advice with a view to a "supplementary volume." This tone certainly ought to encourage helpfulness from the world of collectors, despite the urge to nit-pick.

All this said, I shall now indulge in nit-picking hindsight--but, as will not be immediately apparent, there is a larger purpose behind my carping, a look at a discographic problem that goes beyond the Holmes work, and, in fact, is usefully illuminated by it. To begin, however, with the unimportant, it is not vital and certainly understandable that an author who works for the Australian Trade Commissioner Service and does his research in the capitals of the world has moved Cedar Rapids to Ohio (in the Johanos entry). After all, on the same page he manages the more difficult trick of putting the birthplace of the late, great Thor Johnson, Grand Rapids, in Wisconsin. This is where it belongs, which is going Slonimsky's Baker entry one better because Wisconsin Rapids (so named in the Baker) was indeed called Grand Rapids until Johnson was seven years old. Only slightly less trivial is the assignment, in this same Johnson entry, of the Alex Templeton Gershwin Concerto in F to Jorge Bolet. Almost untrivial, and much more to the point here, is Holmes' accreditation to Thor Johnson of a Westminster disc of Chopin arrangements which properly belongs to Eric Johnson, who gets no entry at all. The same fate befalls Nils Lehmann, an unlisted Swede whose Barber First Symphony recording is snatched up by Fritz Lehmann, and to Walter Collins, similarly missing, whose yeoman efforts on the behalf of Granville Bantock are assigned to Anthony Collins. In the same pattern, also discovered by the method

of random but obsessive browsing common to collector types, is the fact that the violinist/conductor Friedrich Wührer loses his entry to the elder (1900-1975) Friedrich Wührer, who was responsible for some wonderful piano recordings, but who, as far as I can tell, never cut a note as a conductor.

Holmes admits that "perhaps as many as 25 per-cent of the conductors who have made records have...been omitted from this book, simply for lack of information." However, a few hours of sampling (again, random-obsessive) suggest that the missing fraction may be larger than that, and not entirely because of the lack of available information. The above-mentioned Bantock had an important career as a conductor and recorded his own Overture to The Frogs; Henry Hadley, Hershey Kay, Milko Kelemen, Nikolai Rakov, and Otar Taktakishvili are also missing composer/conductors who have made records. Edmund Rubbra conducted two movements of his Missa in Honorem Sancti Dominici for Decca-London when T.B. Lawrence, conductor of the Fleet Street Singers, died in the middle of recording the work; Holmes mentions the record in his Lawrence entry, but he neither mentions nor lists Rubbra as a conductor. (Anton Webern is also missing, but his Schubert recording probably had no disc incarnation by the time of the author's 1977 cutoff date).

Among other well-known or fairly well-known recording figures who fail to turn up are Erno Rapée, Reginald Kell, Emanuel Vardi, Sylvan Levin, Blanche Moyse, Rosario Bourdon, Donald Voorhees, David Shuman, Eugen Papst, Gregory Miller, and leading choral music figures Noble Cain, Leonard Depaur, and Iva Dee Hiatt. The suspicion that there are many more conductors out there is reinforced by the fact that most of these unobscure people turned up easily on unobscure labels. Even the less famous have made records for companies that are distinctly unarcane, and some of the missing are worth mentioning: Harry Horlick (Decca and others), Martti Turunen (Remington--Helsinki University Chorus), Tippe Lumbye (Mercury, from Danish sources--the grandson of the "Waltz King of the North"), John Davison (Lyrichord--remember those brave amateur struggles with Cherubini?), violinist/conductor Maximilian Pilzer (Period), Baroque pioneer Edmund Weyns (Capitol and elsewhere), and many others.

This kind of endless listing is truly a collector's vice, and it has gone on too long for the simple point that Holmes is missing a great many conductors, but I'll mention one more because the reason he is missing may be very relevant to the larger issue at hand (well, almost at hand). H. Arthur Brown is a conductor who did at least a half dozen fine discs for Remington in the early days of the LP. He was one of the conductorial stalwarts of the Southwest, principally in El Paso and Tulsa (but he guest-conducted widely, at Juilliard and elsewhere); his recording of Don Gillis' Tulsa, a Symphonic Portrait in Oil (done, as were all his recordings, with a

Viennese pickup group) was reissued in 1979 by Varèse-Sarabande. Given my own long experience of defending Brown against charges that he is a pseudonym--surely a fate worse than mere oblivion, despite the complimentary implications--I suspect that this is the reason that he is not listed by Holmes.

Holmes does show an awareness of the pseudonym problem. He notes in his entry for George Singer that Irving Kolodin once paid this conductor (another good Remington man) the compliment of suspecting the name concealed a bigger one, as in the Brown instance. In his introduction the author alludes to the problem of seeking biographies for the nonexistent, and he has an entry under "Anon." which deals with the related problem of anonymous conductors. In fact, one of his principal examples, "a celebrated performance of Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1, played by Dinu Lipatti and issued by Seraphim, has since his writing proven to be more misleading than he thought, not the work of Lipatti at all, but of the excellent Halina Czerny-Stefanska, with Smetacek and the Czech Philharmonic (and reissued as such by Quintessence, the jacket gleefully trumpeting the awe-struck reviews the performance garnered as a "Lipatti" performance). In the same entry he mentions a number of relatively minor concealments by RCA and others, for instance "RCA Victor Symphony Orchestra" sometimes playing cover-up for some established organization; however, he never mentions the great Camden Scam, in which a large swatch of the pre-war Victor electric catalogue of symphonic recordings suddenly emerged as the work of the Warwick, Centennial, Festival, Stratford, and Century Symphony Orchestras. This all took place with the quiet acquiescence of key parties involved. RCA was cooperative in spreading word of the "secret" identities, and the use of the names was consistent (except in decisions about what and when to reveal--for instance, the label of the Camden LP of the Feuermann/Stokowski Schelomo, CAL 254, declares it to be by Emanuel Feuermann and the Warwick Symphony Orchestra). Perhaps the most forthright instance of "Anon." is, like the Camden case, relatively unproblematic. This is the Remington release (R 199-156) of Beethoven's First Symphony and Third Leonore Overture, the jacket of which boldly proclaims "Conductor X" in an effort to turn a setback--contractual difficulties for Rodzinski--into a selling point: who is this "masked wonder, nameless but famous...Can you guess?"

For all its lacunae, Holmes' work does more than any recent discographic effort to outline the large, and largely ignored, world of the anonymous and the pseudonymous. The attempt to map the known world provides a promising base for examining the unknown, especially the multitude of "dime-store" and "grocery-store" that populate the "incunable" era of the LP (but also well-known in the 78 period and by no means a phenomenon of the past only, as the inventive folk at Pickwick International and now Aries have demonstrated). A mark of the success of Conductors on Record is that

it does convey a sense of the richness and diversity of the conductor's art, and this is clearly more important to its author--and his readers--than chasing down who exists and who doesn't among piles of worn and cheaply pressed vinyl and shellac that usually preserve dim versions of warhorses. However, Holmes does tread inadvertently into this perilous region by repeating the pattern of his Johnson-Lehmann-Collins errors.

For all his care in avoiding the fake, the author manages to provide space for the records of two of the most prolific fakes of the early fifties, "Joseph Balzer" and "Karl List." For all I know, the Hugo Balzer described by Holmes is a real conductor, really born in 1894, who actually made records; he did not, however, make the long list of Royale records which Holmes ascribes to him. In the first place, all of the Royales I have been able to examine which call upon the services of a Balzer use "Joseph"; in the second place, this name almost certainly conceals a number of real persons, and just as certainly, a "Joseph Balzer" is not among them. This also applies to the orchestra that always seems to be the domain of this Balzer, the "Berlin Symphony Orchestra." Not that he is selfish about it: "Gerd Rubahn" also conducts this plausibly named but chimerical organization, and so does "Dr. Felix Guenther." This last figure complicates the issue considerably, because there really is a Felix Guenther, author, pianist, conductor, who recorded J.C. and C.P.E. Bach (Holmes does list him), but the chances are remote, indeed, that he had anything to do with Gramophone 20200, in which a "Dr. Felix Guenther" accompanies "Louis Stevens" in a simply glorious version of the Brahms Violin Concerto. If "Louis Stevens" exists, I beg his forgiveness, but the only other evidence I have of him is a collection of encores, from a similarly dubious source, Royale 14577, which sounds like a different artist altogether. The Brahms performance does provide a glimmer of hope for identification in that the violinist uses an unusual cadenza, according to Creighton's indispensable Discopaedia of the Violin, the Winkler. The "Joseph Balzer" performances, though often quite interesting, are seldom even that cooperative. I have made one positive identification, and it may or may not be a clue to others: the Balzer St. Matthew Passion is identical to the live Fritz Lehmann performance which was released (in much better sound) in an early Vox LP set (DL 6070). Lehmann's distinctive mastery helps the identification; the highly recognizable voices of Elfriede Trotschel, Helmut Krebs, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (his first commercial release, I gather) make it certain.

Kurt List was, of course, a genuine and distinguished conductor with a fair number of recordings to his credit; however, Holmes goes beyond these accomplishments to grant him the large batch of Royale and Allegro records that are the work of one (or is it many?) "Karl List." Like "Joseph Balzer," "Gerd Rubahn," "Dr. Felix Guenther"--and, for that matter, "Heinz Hermann," "Franz R. Friedl,"

and "Fritz Schreiber"--the mysterious Karl conducts the "Berlin Symphony Orchestra," although he occasionally turns to "The Philharmonic Orchestra," for variety, no doubt. He is useful for his recording with the latter group of the Mendelssohn rarity, the Overture to Athalia (Allegro Elite 3068), a very polished performance, to judge from the (fog-bound) sound of it. There is surely no reason to ascribe any of this work to Kurt List, and while one can make many guesses of varying degrees of shrewdness about the realities behind the fictions in all of these cases, there is very little hope of positive identification. And that is the point behind all of this picking away at the noble effort of Mr. Holmes: Aside from the occasional discovery of performances that are identical with the known (the most famous example being the "Schreiber" - Keilberth Ring), are there people or at least files still in existence anywhere that can clear up some portion of the discographic mess left behind by these pioneering pirates?

It may be difficult to convince anyone that this is a question of importance, especially given the vast amount of discographic labor that is yet to be done with legitimate, identifiable recorded material. If there are, indeed, no sources left by which these fictions can be set aright, then it is also true that the only discographic research to be done in this area is probably limited to physical description, hardly a strong case for drawing support for the cause. Still, there are some wonderfully interesting performances buried in these spurious surroundings, and that alone ought to be an argument for research. There are company names associated with several of the labels in question. The "Record Corporation of America," located, according to some Varsity jackets, in Union City, N.J., was at one time or another responsible for Royale, Allegro, Allegro Royale, Gramophone, and Varsity (among others, no doubt), and the last of these also appeared as the product of the Wright Record Company of Meriden, Connecticut. Are these names useful clues? The performances issued by this version of "R.C.A." are in some cases simply stunning, and if the original tapes could be found, modern transfers could certainly be made that would far exceed in sonic quality these bargain-basement pressings (described on one Varsity disc as "vinyl filled").

The "National Opera Orchestra," a group at least as prolific as the "Berlin Symphony Orchestra" (which, by the way, was also a pick-up group name used by some more-legitimate companies), appears on a great many of these "Record Corporation of America" labels. I have made one positive identification: Varsity 6925 contains an 1812 Overture with unnamed conductor leading this orchestra ("Recorded in Europe") which is identical to the famous Mengelberg performance which has been reissued in many forms. Does this say anything about the brilliant Capriccio Italien on the other side of the Varsity? A grand Unfinished Symphony appears with this orchestra on Varsity LP 49 with the unusually specific designation, "Recorded in Rome."

It is neither of the known Mengelberg recordings; could this hint actually mean something? Is this a De Sabata performance? Again, merely guessing can never be more than a tantalizing game, although I have known of cases in which attempts were made to make something marketable out of the guess-a-dim and pseudonymized Beethoven's Ninth magically became a long-yearned-for Richard Strauss performance; a Schumann Rhenish was transformed into a Weingartner Basel live performance. There certainly are performances which bear the strong imprint of certain conductors--is the great "Rubahn" Bruckner Third (in the rarely used 1878 revision), Allegro Royale 1579, the work of Hermann Abendroth? It seems a bit too eccentric to be a Horenstein performance. Are the Bach Brandenburgs Two and Three on Parade 1016, with the very active "Hans Ledermann" and his "Sonor Symphony Orchestra," live Furtwängler performances? They have the heavy, broad pace and great dynamic contrasts of the known Furtwängler Bach (as well as a trumpeter who plays down an octave in the dicier moments of the second concerto, a not uncommon live-performance practice in the early days). "Ledermann" also made records for the Promenade label ("Synthetic Plastics Company, Newark, N.J."), including opera recordings which, like many of the vocal pirates of these early times, ought to be more identifiable because of the greater number of clues--if researchers are willing to be systematic about examining the performances.

Of course, there is no reason to assume that famous conductors and orchestras lie behind many of these fictions (although the well-known were and are more conveniently available for lifting off the air). There is, for example, Merit M200-25, a Beethoven First Piano Concerto with an orchestra (the "Linz Symphony Orchestra" with Nameless at the helm) that is rankly amateur; the soloist, however ("Fritz Egger"), is very, very good--and for cadenza fans, he plays one that I have never heard anywhere else. Is this a school performance with a visiting dignitary? Many Plymouth, Merit, and Plymouth-Merit records are easily traceable back to Remington originals (at least, I have done this with Hans Wolf and Gui performances), but others are maddeningly elusive (who is the wonderful "Yvonne Heurtevant" who plays a matchless Symphonie espagnole with the "Vienna Tonkünstler Symphony Orchestra" on Plymouth-Merit P12-46--also, by the way, a "Record Corporation of America" product, this time with a smarter address, 551 Fifth Avenue, New York).

Once one decides that they are worth asking, the questions surrounding these vinyl puzzles are endless, and there are performances that are so good that it is something like an aesthetic tragedy that they are to be found, if found at all, in this woebegone form. There is probably little hope for the identification of most of these hidden artists, but surely we can solve bits of the problem if, again, we decide that it is worth solving. With such solutions

it may be that Holmes might be able one day to produce a supplement to Conductors on Record that is revelatory indeed.