

## RECORD REVIEWS

### THE CONDUCTART/IN SYNC CASSETTES:

#### The First Release

Many generations of 78 transfers have come and gone in the LP era. Compared to the detailed, immediate, and full-bodied sound that can be wrung out of many orchestral 78s using decent hardware (good consumer equipment, mind, not necessarily professional sound studio gear), remarkably few of these commercial remasterings have been more than merely adequate in quality, and many have been worse. Nor is the latest work necessarily the best. Anthony Griffith, now retired, is sadly missed, and the flood of indiscriminately selected and dingily processed things emanating from the Bay area does not help to dispel the sense that historical issues may in general be getting poorer rather than better.

It therefore engages the attention when a new 78 transfer series appears from the workshop of an engineer of proven competence (Barton Wimble), with his work packaged under the aegis of another (E. Alan Silver) in the practical and marketable medium of the audio cassette. Archivists just **love** cassettes, so easy to store, label...and steal. But no matter, the cassette lends itself to very high-grade tinkering and rigorous quality control, at both of which In Sync has always excelled. And the copies have been duplicated in "real time," not at the usual high duplicating speed, so the sound quality of the copies is as close as may be to that of the master tapes. Unfortunately, the cassettes are provided bare of program notes, and indeed of discographic information other than a rough recording date for each selection and an issue number, presumably referring to the copy actually used in the transfer.

Not to mince it, the first In Sync release of nine cassettes (eight TDK SA-X 60s and one SA 90) measures up to or exceeds our expectations in most respects. Wimble has uncovered clean and quiet copies of his source material, tried to equalize them properly, and filtered out transient noise without also suppressing musical overtones. (His methods and equipment are described briefly in a note at the end of this review.) So far so good. On the other hand, Wimble's choices of artists and repertoire are only sometimes really compelling; sometimes they are only "interesting," sometimes quite peculiar (or perhaps just random). The actual orchestral playing is usually no better than mediocre, especially when the hard-worked Berlin State Opera Orchestra is involved--which seems to be most of the time. And the side-joins, so crucial to the continuity of the performances, are often unconvincing both as sound and as music, and are occasionally downright crude; more on this below.

Having thus given away the upshot, let us proceed to details.

**BEETHOVEN:** Concerto in D for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 61 (recorded December 15-16, 1926). **BRAHMS:** Concerto in D for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 77 (recorded ca. 1927). Fritz Kreisler, violin; Berlin State Opera Orchestra conducted by Leo Blech. In Sync C4135, \$21.98.

These performances, as documents of style and as musical experiences, strike me as the most valuable of In Sync's first release. In refreshing contrast with the limp and smarmy performances of the same works recorded with Barbirolli about a decade later, these versions show Kreisler at pretty much the top of his form. Certainly his legendary tonal warmth has perhaps never been better captured on disc, and his expansive, indeed sometimes languorous readings are immediately attractive. Leo Blèch's leadership is for the most part sympathetic, more active perhaps in the Brahms (which to some may be felt as overinflected), lapsing at times during the Beethoven's first-movement tuttis into mild metronomic somnolence--but he gets conscientious and sometimes really good playing out of the Berlin State Opera Orchestra, an achievement not to be taken for granted.

These classic sets have been transferred before, but not well. All the HMV and Victor 78s of the Beethoven that I've encountered over the years have been infernally noisy, and the underlying sound, already dim, hasn't benefited from the drastic filtering usually applied. Wimble's processing has gotten rid of much of the hash, and on this cassette the soloist's cadenzas, among other things, are at last to be heard in all their luxuriant tonal quality. The unwonted clarity also reveals that the tympani, diffident throughout both concertos, are just plain missing in the Beethoven finale--why, I wonder?

It's in these particular transfers that the issue of side joins becomes especially critical. Their timing is often musically unconvincing, especially in the first movement of the Beethoven where Kreisler and Blech are very free with the tempo. Worse, some joins are wrongly executed, for In Sync almost always resorts to splices even where the contents of the original discs demand overlapping segues. For example, in the Brahms slow movement one side ends with a forte orchestral chord and the next begins with Kreisler solo playing the note the chord is supposed to accompany; instead of the obligatory overlap we are given a longish pause between the sides. In the first movement of the Beethoven, it's Kreisler who ends one side solo with the orchestra beginning the next with the accompanying chord, and this time In Sync's splice splits the difference, in effect giving the distinguished fiddler the aural hook in mid-note. But the fairly recent Electrola versions (Beethoven, 1C 047-01243; Brahms, 1C 053-01410) are no better managed--they rely exclusively on splices too--and their sound is both drab and noisy compared with what Wimble has achieved.

**BEETHOVEN:** Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, Op. 67. Berlin State Opera Orchestra conducted by Richard Strauss (recorded 1928). **LISZT:** Mazeppa. **WAGNER:** Eine Faust-Ouvertüre. Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Oskar Fried (both recorded ca. 1928). In Syñc C4128, \$17.98.

From the bare outlines that came through the hiss and grit of Brunswick 90172/5, brutally suppressed along with most of the overtones

on Rococo 2015, it's been difficult until now to hear what a clean and consistent line is projected throughout the Beethoven by conductor Richard Strauss and by a reasonably alert Berlin State Opera Orchestra. Propulsive, sturdy, finely detailed (with tempo adjustments for the first movement's second subject and development, and without repeats except in the scherzo), this is a meticulously shaped account of the familiar music. Meticulous too are Wimble's equalization and filtering; the side-joins are serviceable but no more, with the timing not quite convincing and with jumps in surface noise level signaling each switch from inner to outer grooves.

The fascinating Oskar Fried has the Berlin Philharmonic at his disposal, and together they make some pretty impressive sounds. **Mazeppa**, played with tremendous vigor and punch, almost sounds like real music, at least the first time through, while the more substantial Wagner is given all of its alternating dark mystery and Schumannesque fire. Deutsche Grammophon, or Polydor as it was then known outside Germany, provided sound of remarkable depth and presence, and Wimble has conveyed as much of those qualities as possible in his transfer. (And it's good to be able to report that this time the side joins are conspicuously successful.)

My only real complaint about this cassette is that it should have been two: one all-Strauss, with perhaps one of the Mozart symphonies as a coupling, and the other all-Fried. But perhaps we'll have those too, if the In Sync/Conductart line prospers.

**WAGNER:** Der fliegende Holländer: Overture (recorded May 16, 1928). Tristan und Isolde: Act I--Prelude (May 15). Götterdämmerung: Siegfried's Rhine Journey; Siegfried's Funeral Music (December 10, 1927). Parsifal: Act I--Prelude (December 11). Berlin State Opera Orchestra conducted by Karl Muck. In Sync C4133, \$17.98.

**WAGNER:** Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg: Act I--Prelude (recorded December 8, 1927). Siegfried Idyll (November 21, 1929). Parsifal: Act III, Prelude (October 13, 1928). Tannhäuser: Overture (May 17, 1928). Berlin State Opera Orchestra conducted by Karl Muck. In Sync C4136, \$17.98.

Wagner overtures and "bleeding chunks" like the **Götterdämmerung** excerpts are no longer the concert staples they used to be, but together with two important sets of music from **Parsifal** they are the chief and nearly the whole legacy of the distinguished Wagner conductor Karl Muck. (See the discography by Cartwright and Dymant in **ARSC Journal** IX:1, pp. 69-77.)

Muck's repertoire was both operatic and symphonic, and broad enough for his day, but he is best remembered as a **Parsifal** specialist, having conducted most of the performances of that work at Bayreuth from 1901 through 1930. His Berlin recording of Act III (reissued on Preiser LV 100) reveals his way of achieving genuinely slow tempos without becoming ponderous, flaccid, or dull; a sample is the Prelude to that act (omitted by Preiser), sehr langsam as required but nonetheless intense. The Act I Prelude, not previously transferred as far as I know, is rapt and luminous. Other successes are the **Siegfried Idyll**, gentle and re-

poseful, though the full-sized string section dominates the solo winds, and a **Dutchman** Overture full of vigor and salt-spray savor. The rest is less remarkable, and except in the **Parsifal** excerpts and the **Idyll** Muck lets pass a good deal of undercharacterized and scrappy string playing.

These transfers were previously published on cassette in Wimble's Conductart line, where they did not have the benefit of Silver's bank of meticulously tweaked Nakamichi copying decks or TDK's top-of-the-line tape base. Again Wimble has succeeded in getting out of good copies just about all the sound that was in them while suppressing unwanted noise. And again, he has done a merely adequate job of joining the sides; one must be a bit of a conductor oneself to make the dynamics and phrasing across the joins convincing, and this Wimble is not, while some of the source material requires but does not get overlapping segues. The transfers have been pitched correctly except for the **Meistersinger** prelude, which is slightly sharp.

**WEBER:** Oberon: Overture (recorded 1928). **BEETHOVEN:** Leonore Overture No. 1, Op. 138 (1931). **GLUCK:** Alceste, Overture (ca. 1935). **BEETHOVEN:** Coriolan Overture, Op. 62 (1931). **WAGNER:** Tannhäuser, Overture (May 9, 1932). **BEETHOVEN:** Die Ruinen von Athen, Op. 113: Marcia alla turca (May 1930). Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by Willem Mengelberg. In Sync C 4129, \$17.98.

This Mengelberg anthology does not do the conductor justice. He was at his best in big, rhetorical pieces like **Ein Heldenleben** (with the New York Philharmonic, Victor 6982/6) and the Tchaikovsky **Pathétique** (with the Concertgebouw, Columbia 67735/9); and then there's the Adagietto from Mahler's Fifth Symphony (Concertgebouw, Columbia L 1798), music with which Mengelberg had a special affinity and of which he recorded too little. Here, to these ears, he usually sounds capricious, wantonly distorting, and lacking in taste. (Mengelberg freaks may claim that for their hero these are relatively straightforward readings, and they are right--he grew even more willful as he got older.)

The Coriolan Overture, for example, is grotesquely pulled around. What makes this record amazing is the Concertgebouw's incredibly precise execution of Mengelberg's virtually unprepared tempo changes; it would be instructive and probably very amusing to hear some of today's crack orchestras attempt this kind of ensemble precision, though none of our current lions of the podium has either Mengelberg's perverse imagination nor his endless, dogged striving to get exactly the effects he wanted. The **Oberon** Overture is even more eccentric, with a different tempo for each tune, and the orchestra's playing is if anything even more refined. And so it goes. An exception is the **Tannhäuser** overture, with a Bacchic frenzy in the Venusberg music that, coming shortly after Muck's effort in the same music, reveals the latter as rather staid. And the Turkish March, trivial music though it is, comes across delightfully, both brilliant and humorous. There can't be too much praise for the Concertgebouw's achievement, with good-to-superb orchestral ensemble in all departments and extraordinary resources of string color.

The Concertgebouw strings of this period have in fact never been documented in reissue with such stunning clarity and force. Yet there are problems. Many of Columbia's Amsterdam recordings are plagued by

excessive bass. Barton Wimble's equalization does nothing to abate it, and far too much comes through for comfortable control with the inflexible front end of any cassette deck known to me, or indeed with the limited bass tone controls on most consumer listening gear. The **Oberon** Overture in particular sounds turgid at forte or above, and much detail is lost. And I'm afraid that there are side-join problems here too, with a particularly bad splice causing a quarter-bar repeat in the **Tannhäuser** Overture.

**ROUSSEL:** Le Festin de l'Araignée, Op. 17: Suite (recorded ca. 1930). **DEBUSSY:** Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune (ca. 1929). **RAVEL:** Daphnis et Chloé: Suite No. 2 (1930). **IBERT:** Escales (ca. 1928). Marcel Moyse, flute (Debussy); Concerts Straram Orchestra conducted by Philippe Gaubert (Ravel) and Walther Straram (remainder). In Sync C 4134, \$17.98.

The clarifying process imposed on French Columbia 78s in this cassette confirms what many of us already knew: French orchestral playing once upon a time did not partake of certain traits of execution valued elsewhere in the world, like blended tonal qualities, precision of ensemble, and finely graded dynamics. The sound of this orchestra is not helped by the effects of very close-up miking in a recording venue that soaks up reverberations like blotting paper. Nor is there much finesse of inflection from the orchestra's founder or from flutist/conductor Gaubert, who accounts for a particularly rough and stodgy reading of the Ravel. Still, the Debussy contains some heartfelt and polished solo wind playing. Ravel, Ibert, and Roussel (but of course not Debussy) are said to have been present at the recording sessions of their works, though of course there can be no evidence that they were delighted with the results. But perhaps the slightly garlicky aural atmosphere in the Roussel and Ibert may please listeners who have developed a taste for that sort of thing.

This cassette exists in two editions, for Wimble has redone the master tape since the original was published. Comparing both versions of the Debussy I find that the remastering plays in pitch--the first edition was nearly a semitone flat--and that a slight but nasty bit of distortion (or very fast flutter) no longer taints the oboe and cymbales antiques. So the second edition is worth making an effort to get. Unfortunately it's impossible to tell from the packaging and labels which is which, so the only way you can be sure of what you're getting is to order directly from In Sync. The address can be found in the note at the end of this review.

**ORCHESTRAL SAMPLER:** Great Conductors of the 20th Century. **RIMSKY-KORSAKOV:** Mlada: Procession of the Nobles. London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Albert Coates (recorded October 14, 1930). **RAVEL:** Alborada del Gracioso. Concerts Straram Orchestra conducted by Walther Straram (ca. 1930). **ROSSINI:** Il Barbiere di Siviglia: Overture. Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler (1935). **BEETHOVEN:** Die Ruinen von Athen, Op. 113: Marcia alla turca. Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by Willem Mengelberg (May 1930). **MOZART:** Die Entführung aus dem Serail, K. 384: Overture. Berlin State Opera Orchestra conducted by Alexander von Zemlinsky (ca. 1927). **WAGNER:**

Die Walküre: Magic Fire Music. Symphony Orchestra conducted by Coates (January 26, 1926). **ROUSSEL**: La Naissance de la Lyre, Op. 24: Danse des Nymphes. Symphony Orchestra conducted by Piero Coppola (ca. 1930). **WEINBERGER**: Schwanda: Polka, Furiant. BSOO conducted by Leo Blech (ca. 1929). **WEBER**: Abu Hassan: Overture. Hallé Orchestra conducted by Sir Hamilton Harty (1927). **VERDI**: I Vespri Siciliani: Overture. BSOO conducted by Pietro Mascagni (ca. 1927). In Sync C 4130, \$17.98.

The cassette's subtitle is bunk. Furtwängler is undoubtedly a great conductor; Mengelberg is claimed by some to be (though not by me); and Zemlinsky, whose compositions are being rediscovered these days, was praised by Stravinsky in **Themes and Episodes** as "of all the conductors I have heard...the one who achieved the most consistently high standards. I remember a **Marriage of Figaro** conducted by him in Prague as the most satisfying operatic experience of my life." But the remaining six conductors represented here are at best capable, and one of them is on this hearing not even competent.

The recommended aural experiences: Furtwängler and the Berlin Philharmonic, out of their usual repertoire, are appropriately vigorous and light-handed in Rossini. Mengelberg and the Concertgebouw do wonderful things with the Turkish March, but this is a duplication from the Mengelberg cassette reviewed above and something new might have been a better choice. Zemlinsky partly though not entirely justifies Stravinsky's praise with some poised, not overfast Mozart. Coppola, HMV's house conductor in Paris and a capable if seldom inspiring musician, does reasonably well by some little-known and charming Roussel. Harty takes the cheery little Weber overture out for a canter without perhaps matching the brightness and brio of Max von Schillings on a roughly contemporary German Columbia. Here the pleasure ends. Straram's clipped, stiff and dimly characterized **Alborada del Gracioso** has stylish if not precise string playing but the winds lack presence. Blech's fairly lively **Schwanda** excerpts are made painful to listen to by bad overcutting. By contrast, HMV's London engineers do Albert Coates proud--the Wagner disc has an especially alluring smoothness and depth of tone--but Coates himself is typically coarse in both his selections, and typically rushed in the Rimsky. Worst of all is Mascagni, hardly a notable conductor even of his own music, and in virtuosic Verdi lacking not only musical ideas but even the skill needed to hold his players together, and one might add the integrity and self-respect to refuse his approval to the disreputable results.

Wimble's transfer work is mostly up to his usual high standard, though the bass in the Harty Columbia needs curbing. His source material is not quite the best; the last side of the Mascagni record is off-center, and there's a scrape in the Straram. Most of the selections are single-sided but one has a poor side-join: the Rossini, in which the bass note that ends side 1 and begins side 2 is heard both times.

The selection is a mishmash, with no criteria for inclusion in evidence except, perhaps, mere rarity. The quirky list of contents may seem seductive; the actuality is less so.

John D. Wiser

## HOW THEY DO IT

A Conductart/In Sync production goes through four stages: selecting the source material, transferring it to tape, editing the results into a reproduction master, and duplicating the master on cassettes. Barton Wimble of Conductart is chiefly responsible for the first two stages, E. Alan Silver of In Sync for the latter two. They have provided the information for this note.

Choosing artists and repertoire is a complex and hard to describe process involving personal taste, market sense, and knowledge of what's accessible in first-rate 78 pressings. For practical reasons, Wimble's source material comes from private collections rather than institutional or corporate archives. His disc playback equipment changes as the state of the art improves, and the electronics he currently uses are quite different from those with which the first Conductart/In Sync masters were made. Wimble now plays back discs on a Fons Mark I turntable fitted with an outboard digital readout by Jeffrey Duboff, with an SME 3009 arm carrying a Stanton 500 AL cartridge with which he can use at least a dozen different stylus shapes and sizes. The resulting output is fed first into a Stanton 310 linear stereo preamp and then into a Packburn 101 which continually selects the best signal from either groove wall, blanks out pops and ticks, and creates a monaural signal. This signal is then input to a UREI 565 notch filter set to remove surface hiss and crackle. Finally, equalization is applied using an Owl I, the choice of turnover frequency usually being the most crucial decision for early electric 78s. For most Conductart masters the signal has been recorded as a 15 ips analog tape using Dolby A noise reduction, but now the taping is done digitally.

The master tapes of the unjoined 78 sides are then edited together, sometimes by Wimble but often by Silver. Splices are preferred to overlaps because the latter usually requires mixing down two overlapping tracks, in effect making a second generation dub. Silver then duplicates the cassettes in real time--that is, at normal playback speed rather than the higher speeds normally used in the industry--to preserve the master's frequency and dynamic range. The master playback machine is a Studer A67 or A80, and the slaves are 20 Nakamichi 582 and 582Z machines calibrated for head azimuth and frequency response before each run. The master and all 20 dupes are compared continuously throughout the run to ensure a close match. Of course, such close quality control adds to the list price of the tapes, which are quite expensive.

Wimble says that whenever he feels he can improve significantly on the first Conductart/In Sync edition, he may redo the tape masters. So far the only revised edition to be published is the cassette of the Straram Orchestra.

If In Sync cassettes are not available in stores in your area, here is the ordering address: In Sync Laboratories, Inc., 2211 Broadway, New York, NY 10024.

A more detailed treatment of the Conductart/In Sync techniques is in preparation and will appear in due course in **Opus** magazine.

J.W.N.F.