

**MENDELSSOHN:** *String Quartet in E-flat*, Op. posth. **GLINKA:** *String Quartet in F*. Westwood Quartet (Louis Kaufman, Joseph Stepansky, violinists; Louis Kievman, violist; George Neikrug, cellist). Protone CSPR 164 (cassette, stereo), \$8.98.

**TOCH:** *String Quartet in D-flat*, Op. 18. "Spitzweg" Serenade in G for Two Violins and Viola. Westwood Quartet. Protone CSPR 165 (cassette, stereo), \$8.98. (Available from Protone Records, 970 Bel Air Road, Los Angeles, CA 90077)

There are some good and proper reasons for the cassette reissue (and acquisition) of these very early stereo chamber music recordings. One is the participation of violinist Louis Kaufman, the most widely known of the Westwood Quartet players, and his colleagues, men of comparable experience and longtime substantial contributors to West Coast musical life. And there's repertoire interest too: the Mendelssohn and Toch quartets in particular are worth hearing, and performances and recordings have not been abundant.

Mendelssohn's E-flat Quartet of 1823 (put your calculator away—the composer was 14) is a Mozartean essay that has moments of inflexibility and airlessness, but is characteristically lyrical, formally punctilious, amazingly secure in instrumental handling and effective counterpoint. It is fitfully prophetic of the Octet in E-flat that was to come along two years on. Glinka's Quartet in F (1829-30) received a tepid notice from Wilhelm Altmann: "Very simply conceived and easy to play, it is not in the least original, showing acquaintance with Haydn's quartet style...." Truly, coming from the seminal figure in national opera, this music is a bit of a bore. One can't say a disappointment, since encounters with other chamber music works by Glinka haven't raised expectations very high.

The Quartet in D-flat of Ernest Toch (1887-1964) is a mainstream late-Romantic work in five rangy and attractive movements. Toch's treatment of the medium is secure, inventive, and vigorous, although his subject matter is conventional. The "Spitzweg" Serenade of 1917 is lighter, tighter, and very much drier, music that has an air of being perpetually off-balance.

Performances are variable in effect. The outer movements of the Mendelssohn are taken at quite a clip, not strongly inflected or punctuated, a real American-style account. The slow movement is opened up more, but is still notably cool in expression. The Glinka is cleaner and less precipitate. The Toch performances seem stronger, but that may well be a function of the recording quality. A relatively distant, low-level and strongly ambient recording dilutes the Mendelssohn/Glinka production; the Toch performances are much closer-to, drier in surroundings, beautifully detailed

and balanced, if not very pronounced in stereo effect. For a late 1950s product it is superb, where the other coupling is vintage ordinaire.

We may be getting closer, now, to reissue of another worthwhile series of chamber music recordings in which Kaufman partook as a violist--a splendidly played and decently recorded group of Columbia 78 sets of the Musical Art Quartet, comprising Sascha Jacobsen, Bernard Ocko, Kaufman, and Marie Roemaet-Rosanoff.

John D. Wiser

**PUCCINI:** *La Bohème* (recorded February 23-April 11, 1928). Rosina Torri, soprano (*Mimi*); Aristodemo Giorgini, tenor (*Rodolfo*); Ernesto Badini, baritone (*Marcello*); Thea Vitulli, soprano (*Musetta*); Aristide Baracchi, baritone (*Schaunard*); Luigi Manfrini, bass (*Colline*); Salvatore Baccaloni, bass (*Benoit, Alcindoro*); Giuseppe Nesi, tenor (*Parpignol*); La Scala Chorus and Orchestra conducted by Carlo Sabajno. In Sync C 4131/2 (2 cassettes, mono), \$35.90.

What makes an old recording "historic"? Age matters, of course, but for me there must be other reasons as well to justify bringing a record back into circulation. I want it to tell me something significant about the past--about the artistry of notable performers no longer before the public, about bygone styles of performance, about the musical life of earlier times.

This 1928 *La Bohème* doesn't really qualify, though at first glance it would seem to. It is certainly old, being the second complete recording ever made of this popular work. It dates from Toscanini's second directorship of La Scala, a fabled time. All the principals except for Aristodemo Giorgini and Luigi Manfrini had sung there in *La Bohème* during the '20s. And Giorgini, for his part, was a tenor of major repute, while Salvatore Baccaloni soon became the leading basso buffo of the day.

But this set's apparent documentary value does not bear examination well. For one thing, there is no direct and demonstrable connection with Toscanini. The Maestro had not conducted *La Bohème* at La Scala since the winter of 1924-5, and the revivals since then had been led by Gabriele Santini and Antonino Votto. Doubtless many musical details were carried over from stage performances into the recording, but they can't confidently be attributed to Toscanini himself.

Indeed HMV's principals are not even those of the 1928 La Scala revival, mounted in mid-season toward the end of the recording sessions. Sabajno and his colleagues in the Milan office satisfied themselves with a *Mimi* who had been the third-cast Musetta from 1924 and a *Marcello* and *Musetta* who