

HISTORISCHE AUFNAHMEN

by

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With all the tremendous new surge of interest in ragtime music, it is surprising to me that so few reissues have appeared recently except for some piano rolls. Folkways has now done its part with two records entitled "Ragtime Piano Originals" (RF 23) and "Ragtime Piano Interpretations" (RF 24), compiled by David Jasen from extremely rare originals, almost all of them acoustical recordings. I rather missed Ohman and Arden (although one of Ohman's compositions is included), but otherwise I can hardly complain about this continually fascinating collection of material, most of it by names that were completely new to me. The historical interest of the recordings may be obvious, but I would have to say that the outstanding quality of these collections is the enjoyableness of the music and playing. During the week after they arrived I had at least one of these records on the turntable every day. Considering the staggering rarity of most of the original recordings, the sound quality is quite acceptable and the dubs (by Nick Perls) have been done expertly. (Oddly enough, though, in RF 24 there are many unremoved clicks and unfaded endings, faults absent from RF 23.)

My one beef about these records is that Jasen's interesting annotations contain no discographic information at all. Instead, the listener is referred to Jasen's book Recorded Ragtime 1897-1958, published at \$8.50 by Archon Books (995 Sherman Ave., Hamden, Conn. 06514). Thanks a lot, Dave! The information is there in the book, but who wants to be bothered with looking it up every time the record plays? Besides, while I don't think anyone is going to buy the book only for the discographic information on two LP reissues, including that much information in the program notes for the record might have helped to sell a few copies of the book.

Recorded Ragtime is a list of all 78 rpm recordings of ragtime compositions known to the author, a sensible limitation. After the introduction, the "Discography" lists these compositions alphabetically by title. Only the first publication of a record is listed, which is not, I think, a sensible limitation at all and deprives the reader of what might have been some very useful information. Jasen lists recording dates when he has them, release dates when he has only those, and this information--which appears in a large majority of the listings--might prove the single most useful feature of the book. At any rate, it probably represents the largest amount of research effort. He does not list sizes of records--a minor but annoying omission. He also does not indicate couplings, which information thus becomes impossible to extract from the book even though it is theoretically there.

Section 2, "Composers and their Works", lists the compositions in the discography by composer. What vital statistics Jasen has for the composers are included, along with the copyright date of the compositions--more very useful research. At the end, there is, thank goodness, an index to performers, without which the utility of the book would be drastically diminished.

Despite some flaws, the book is well thought-out and consistently executed. I would think it an excellent investment for a ragtime collection or a sound archive.

To most record collectors, the Westminster Gold label represents--if they have noticed it at all--a cheap record label with cutesy covers. Even I had at first presumed it would be no more than a token effort at keeping the Westminster name alive. However, with an increasingly large catalog, one of the most active release schedules of any classical label, tremendously wide distribution, and the lowest price of any classical label in the Schwann Catalog, the Westminster Gold label has become a force to be taken seriously. And if we can laugh at those atrocious Wagner covers and such incredible goofs as the misspelling of Mstislav Rostropovich's name in huge type on a record cover, or releases in which the titles of such pieces as the Brahms Violin Concerto (WGS-8260) or Prokofieff's Piano Sonata No. 7 (WGM-8231) are missing altogether, the quality and importance of some of the releases may well still our laughter, especially those from the Melodiya catalog.

Among the most interesting releases have been several by the "Million Ruble Trio" of Kogan, Gilels, and Rostropovich, singly and together. On WGM-8237, we have the Paganini Violin Concerto No. 1 played by Kogan with the "Grand Symphony Orchestra of the All-Union Radio" (the same orchestra, I presume, which used to be identified on U.S. releases as the "USSR State Radio Orchestra") conducted by Vassily Nebolsin. This performance, previously available here only in a miserable transfer on the Bruno label, is neither as well recorded nor as well supported by the orchestra as the Paris recording once issued on Angel 35502, but the fire and stunning technique of Kogan's playing are more than enough to overcome a scrappy orchestra and dull recording.

Of Gilels, we have had mostly releases of material still available on Monitor. However, the newest record, WGM-8309 ("Russian Keyboard Masters, Volume 2"--Volume 1 was also Gilels) is a collection of interesting material from 78's recorded between 1946 and 1950--not in the 1930's as Westminster's incorrectly-translated liner notes have it--and never issued in the U.S. before. (Since none of the pieces can be found in the World Encyclopedia of Recorded Music, I would presume that the recent Melodiya LP issue of these recordings was their first publication anywhere, although with Russian 78's such a presumption may not be justified). The sound of these recordings ranges from acceptable to miserably dull, but the performances are fascinating.

The playing is obviously that of a young man, who shows more forceful impulses than the more finished but often duller mature Gilels. The Schumann Toccata, Chopin Ballade No. 1, and Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody No. 9 are really quite exciting.

There are a couple of Rostropovich concerto records on Westminster Gold, WGM-8227 with the Saint-Saëns and Schumann concertos, and WGM-8245 with the Dvořák, all performances previously and currently available on Monitor. Also still listed on Monitor (MC 2010) is the Beethoven "Archduke" Trio, now also on WGM-8225 (with a picture of three teddy bears on the cover!). However, two further releases contain material completely new to the U.S. One new record, which I have seen but don't even have the number for (Westminster Gold has been very sluggish about sending information to Schwann), has Schumann's Trio No. 1, in D, Op. 63, Haydn's Trio "No. 19" (in G, Op. 70, No. 2), and the Beethoven Trio in E flat of 1791. These are all from a Melodiya original, D 028117/8, which received very brief and limited distribution in the U.S. On WGM-8274, the Trio adds violinist Rudolf Barshai for the Fauré Piano Quartet No. 1, in C, Op. 15. I own this as a domestic Soviet release (USSR D/04572/3), and don't know whether it was ever distributed here or not. The performances are entirely typical of the performers: superbly balanced and coordinated, impulsive and musical, representing an extraordinarily high level of accomplishment. The Fauré may, in fact, be too impulsive for some listeners, with Gilels emphasizing the Lisztian elements in the piano writing (although not at the expense of his colleagues), but I loved it.

Westminster Gold is also performing a service by keeping a few Sviatoslav Richter releases in circulation. The Tchaikovsky First Concerto (WGM-8228) with Yevgeny Mravinsky conducting the Leningrad Philharmonic, is certainly a finer performance than the very mannered von Karajan-directed version in stereo (DGG SLPM 138 822). The old Rachmaninoff Second Concerto with Kurt Sanderling conducting the Leningrad Philharmonic (WGM-8231) may not be as well played or recorded as the DGG stereo version (SLPM 138 076) with Stanislaw Wislocki and the inspired Warsaw Philharmonic, but it does have the (uncredited!) bonus of Prokofieff's Seventh Sonata, a studio recording unavailable in the U.S. since the demise of Artia (ALP-154). Greater than either of these, and a most pleasant surprise to welcome back into the catalog, is WGM-8256, Haydn's Sonata No. 20 (in C) and Beethoven's "Appassionata", recorded at a recital in Moscow in June of 1960, only three months before Richter's American debut. Some may find the Beethoven overwrought, but to me it represents one of those super-human moments of intensity, inspiration, and technical supremacy that we are fortunate to have captured for us on recordings, and I have never heard a more convincing or thrilling version of the piece by anyone. (The Haydn is no less superb, either, merely less spectacular). If you do get this record, however, don't let it drive you crazy; the labels are reversed.

Westminster Gold's packaging, as hinted above, is variable and sometimes unforgiveable. The program notes for the live Richter record mentioned above consist of an incredibly vapid description of Richter's playing, so poorly translated from the Russian as to become hopelessly meaningless. ("Perhaps the most amazing quality of Richter is--his ability to approach each musical style in a different way, knowing how to understand it and how to develop it..."). Others have decent enough program notes. Regrettably, in a couple of instances where I have been able to compare WG's pressings with Russian originals, the sound of the new editions has been more restricted in both frequency and dynamic range than the originals. (Perhaps this is the fault of the tapes supplied by Melodiya). However, the differences are hardly enough for me to condemn the reissues.

"Historical" releases, of course, form only a small portion of the Westminster Gold catalog, but we may be pleased that they are being published at all, especially in the original mono. And for all their freaky covers and sometimes fouled-up packaging, I suspect that these records are reaching many people who don't usually buy classical records at all. Long may they prosper.

I am very happy to report the appearance of World Records SH 223, the Brahms First Piano Concerto by Artur Schnabel with the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by George Szell. This major item in the Schnabel legacy has been available previously only on Rococo 2022, a miserably dull-sounding transfer taken from a copy of the original so poor that it even skips a groove in the first movement. (This is hardly a rare recording!) EMI's transfer has been made by audio ace Anthony Griffith, who has been responsible for some of the most phenomenally fine-sounding reissues it has ever been my pleasure to hear. If the sound on this one is a bit thin-sounding, I think we must blame the original. (However, it also seems that this time Griffith has not been able to work from the original masters as he usually does, since there are some intermittent patches of surface noise.)

The performance itself is a controversial one. Some listeners have maintained that Schnabel's technique is simply inadequate to cope with the demands of the Brahms Concertos. To be certain, there are some major and obvious flaws in the playing, including those idiosyncratic trills of Schnabel's, some moments of poor coordination with the orchestra (Schnabel's fault, not Szell's), and more than a few "split" notes, especially in the famous double-octave passage in the first movement. On the other hand, those double octaves are played with such drive and power that I, for one, don't care about a few extra notes; better that than an antiseptic rendering like Curzon's. This cannot be called a wholly successful performance, but its many beauties cannot be denied either. If it is not the perfect Brahms First Concerto (the closest to that I've heard is the pre-war Backhaus, never on LP), it is still an interesting and sometimes moving sample of Schnabel's playing.

Turnabout's "Historical Series" has brought us some remarkable recordings. THS 65001 brings back the live performances of Liszt's Sonata and Funérailles once issued on Remington RLP-199-85, to which are added studio recordings of three more Liszt pieces originally on Remington RLP-199-17. Barere, like Vladimir Horowitz a pupil of the great Russian virtuoso Felix Blumenfeld, was without question one of the greatest Lisztianers of our century. You will seldom hear more spectacular piano playing anywhere than on this record, and yet the musical values of the pieces are not slighted. (As much cannot be said for all of Barere's playing, but most of his few recordings are very fine indeed.) Unfortunately, the sound of the record is no better than that on the original Remington releases, and the side-break which originally interrupted the Liszt Sonata (now complete on one side) is perpetuated by a rather long pause. Somebody didn't know enough to splice this tape properly, and it's annoying. Still, considering how many collectors have shelled out small fortunes for Barere's Remington records, the return of this material is a pleasure to welcome, and I hope that the 2 1/2 records' worth of additional material will follow promptly.

On THS-65007, we have the Bloch Violin Concerto, as played by Joseph Szigeti with the Paris Conservatory Orchestra conducted by Charles Munch, recorded in 1939. There has not been an "official" LP release of this performance since the old Columbia ML 4679, and it was the one item I really missed in the recent Columbia "Art of Joseph Szigeti" set. Another recent LP issue of the recording by the Bruno Walter Society (BWS-715) had two additional pieces, but was otherwise in every way inferior to the new Turnabout. Evidently this recording, licensed from EMI, was transferred by EMI's engineers, for the sound is extremely fine and the difficult splices (completely botched by BWS) are undetectable here. This was one of Szigeti's most inspired performances on records, and no other recorded performance has come close to equalling it.

Several years ago I bought a large number of blues reissues on the Yazoo label and was very pleasantly surprised to find that the transfers to LP (by the label's proprietor, Nick Perls) were among the best I have ever heard. So, when I encountered "Charlie Patton, Founder of the Delta Blues" (Yazoo L-1020, two records), I was extremely pleased. Patton's records are notoriously difficult to find; they are poor pressings to start with, and by the time they reach the hands of collectors they are usually quite worn, to boot. I have heard some previous Patton LP transfers, and while the man's artistry was (barely) audible, the surface noise was fearsome and the lyrics even more unintelligible than on most blues records.

There is still plenty of surface noise here, but it is tolerable. Perls explains his decision to use fake stereo (not used as a selling point, since the word "stereo" does not appear anywhere) as an attempt to offer the listener his choice of different equalizations. Well, he's right, although any of the four possible

patterns (A channel, B channel, A plus B, or stereo) sounds better than any previous Patton on LP. As if this were not bounty enough, there are detailed notes on each of the songs and--believe it or not--complete lyrics. The transcriptions are far more accurate than most such jobs--as they might well be, since the notes and lyrics represent the combined efforts of seven blues collectors--and serve as a tremendous aid to appreciation of the recordings:

As for Patton himself, he was not the most exciting of bluesmen, but a true classic. He represents the earliest surviving Mississippi Delta blues style, and was acclaimed by others (including the great Son House) as the greatest of them and the strongest influence on later Delta bluesmen. It was long past due for him to receive this kind of representation on LP, and I'm immensely pleased to find so extensive a selection so well transferred and annotated.

For a pianist who left no commercially issued electrical recordings, Josef Hofmann is certainly well represented on LP today--thanks, of course, to the advocacy of the International Piano Archives. The latest release, IPA 5007/8, is a complete recital of April 7, 1938, given at Casimir Hall, the small recital hall of the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. The shorter pieces from this recital were previously issued as Veritas VM-101, long out of print anyway. However, Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata and Schumann's Kreisleriana (abridged by Hofmann) are issued for the first time.

The sound quality of these recordings is very poor, a particularly unfortunate disservice to a coloristic artist like Hofmann. However, at least some of the essentials of his interpretation come through for us. The "Waldstein" is an extremely unconventional performance, full of instances of tempo alteration for expressive effect. Many people are going to find it eccentric, I am sure. I found it fascinating and educational, but would never think of calling it a perfect performance and am not sure I even like it. Still, the authority is there whether you agree with the ideas or not, as it is also in what we have (six of the eight pieces) of Kreisleriana. Of the shorter pieces, certainly the most amazing is the Chopin "Minute" Waltz, in which Hofmann plays the repeat of the first section with the right hand in thirds. Not the best Chopin, perhaps, but stunning anyway.

A lavish, illustrated booklet accompanies the records, including even a detailed analysis of the "Waldstein" performance by Ezra Rachlin (a Hofmann pupil) and a history of Hofmann's relationship with the Curtis Institute. I'm sure IPA has done whatever was possible with the sound quality of the recording, but I do wish they would check their test pressings; Kreisleriana is considerably off-center. The set is being distributed commercially, and is also available from IPA at 215 W. 91st St., New York, N.Y. 10024.

One of the most unusual LP reissues I have seen comes from the Grenadilla Society (P.O. Box 279, New York, N.Y. 10010), devoted to clarinetists and clarinet music. This record, GS-1002, reproduces the 1939 Musicraft 78 set of Brahms' Clarinet Trio as played by Ralph McLane, with cellist Stanley Hunkins and pianist Milton Kaye. McLane, who was first clarinetist of the Philadelphia Orchestra for some years, is evidently something of a legend among clarinetists--or so David Weber's extensive reminiscences, included with this album, would lead one to believe. The clarinet playing does show exceptional control, and I suppose clarinetists will be fascinated to hear it. But the performance as a whole is neither very bad nor very good, and not many people will want to pay the \$7.50 price of this record for the mere 24 minutes of music contained on its one side. The dubbing is like the performance, neither very good nor very bad. There isn't much you can do with Musicraft recordings, anyway; the originals aren't well recorded and the pressings are pretty poor.

An unexpected return from the past may be heard in the newly-issued three-record set, Olympic 8117/3, the complete violin sonatas and partitas of Bach as played by Georges Enesco. These recordings were originally issued on Continental CLP 104/6, records so obscure that they were not listed in Record Ratings or Schwann. (I once saw one of these, an individual record boxed in a large long red album.) The First Partita was also published as a 10" Remington record (PL-1-149), and all of the recordings were issued privately in Japan several years ago. To the best of my knowledge that tells the entire discographical story until now.

By the time he made these recordings, of course, Enesco was long past his prime as a violinist. It hardly seems likely that he was ever the most stylish Bach player. What we have here, then, is a set of performances played somewhat shakily and with frequently questionable approaches to problems of Baroque interpretation. But Enesco was also a profound musician, and even where his interpretations fail to convince he remains consistently interesting. Another somewhat "historical" release (Vanguard Bach Guild BG-627/9), played by Joseph Szigeti, provides my own favorite way of hearing these works. But violin aficionados will find much of interest in Enesco's performances. At any rate, the new reissue provides the opportunity to hear what were previously among the rarest conceivable LP issues.

Olympic's "stereo" rechannelling has done little harm to the original sound--which is, unfortunately, extremely dull and un-lifelike. However, you can hear what is going on. And if the pressings are not the best imaginable, they are immeasurably superior to Continental's.