

FELIX WEINGARTNER

Felix Weingartner, who was born in 1863, is the earliest Central European conductor to leave a recorded legacy that approaches the scope of his concert hall repertory. His records were almost all well-made, and still provide highly significant musical pleasures rather than just glimpses into the past; and the reappearance of a significant number of them on LP - plus the recent publication of a remarkable book about the records and the man himself - is a matter of no small importance.

Weingartner was a student of Liszt, knew and received the praise of Brahms, met Wagner and heard his disciples perform, and in general was at the center of Austro-German musical life from the 1880s through the 1930s - something which alone makes him a subject of historical interest. But his performing style, formed partly by antipathy to some of the excesses that were accepted almost as standard during his formative years, was essentially "modern" in its concentration upon structure and textual honesty, and because that style resulted in performances of exceptional freshness and vitality Weingartner exerted a strong influence against those 19th century excesses upon two generations of listeners; he was thus an historic figure as well as an historical one and consequently one of the most significant figures in the early history of orchestral recording.

Biographical sketches of Weingartner can be found in most musical reference works and do not require much attention here, but a brief outline may help to put him into perspective, since he was a man of broad interests, writing extensively on musical and other subjects throughout his life and even, apparently, possessing considerable gifts as an actor; but music was his main interest. A brilliant piano student, he went to Weimar to study with Liszt, but not long afterward turned his attention to conducting, which eventually came to dominate his career to such an extent that his original desire, to compose, had to be satisfied simultaneously. He became conductor at Mannheim in 1889, then went to Berlin two years later to conduct at the Court Opera as well as give symphony concerts. When Mahler left the Vienna Opera in 1907 Weingartner succeeded him as director, also becoming chief conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic; he held the latter post until 1927, but resigned the former amid scandal and controversy in 1911. After a succession of operatic engagements in Austria and Germany Weingartner resigned all of his posts in 1927 and in some ways "retreated" to the Swiss city of Basel, where he taught, composed and conducted the local orchestra, appearing outside the city only as a guest conductor. In 1935 he again became conductor of the Vienna Opera (Marcel Prawy in his gossipy "Die Wiener Staatsoper" characterizes Weingartner as spending most of his time to regain the post, which may be unfair since Prawy makes plain his admiration of Weingartner's old conductorial rival in Vienna and Berlin, Richard Strauss). Weingartner's Viennese tenure was again short, however, and by 1936 he had resigned over "artistic policy", to be succeeded by another long-time rival, Bruno Walter. A good deal of guest-conducting followed,

including a highly successful series of appearances in Japan, where records had made him extremely popular. After 1940 he was confined to his Basel home by the war, and he composed and conducted there until his death on May 7, 1942.

Weingartner's work in the opera house, which as one can tell occupied him throughout his life, was hardly at all represented on records; he was preserved as a concert conductor, and his recording activity fell into three main periods. The first was between 1910 and 1913, when he made two records in Vienna for HMV and several in Columbia in New York City; both of the former and several of the latter with his third wife, Lucille Marcel. He resumed recording, for English Columbia, in 1923 in London, and between then and 1930 made an extensive series, including the last five Beethoven symphonies and other larger works of Beethoven, Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Brahms. Weingartner's work in the studios tapered off as the Depression deepened, but he resumed his former active role in 1935 and during the next five years made another extensive series for Columbia in Vienna, London, and Paris. Because he died in 1942, Weingartner was already an historical figure when LP was introduced but the great fame which his records had acquired had endured. When American Columbia began to issue its historical LPs in 1951 it turned to them almost immediately, issuing his recordings of the Beethoven and Brahms symphonies in one continuously numbered group of discs. Other artists were to follow as the company developed its still-distinctive sun disc cover - Szigeti, Huberman, Gieseking, Feuermann - but it was Weingartner upon whom they continued to concentrate, eventually issuing a total of twenty-one LPs containing, in addition to those already mentioned, works of Bach, Handel, Leopold and W. A. Mozart, Wagner, Johann Strauss, Beethoven (the Triple Concerto, five overtures, and Weingartner's transcription of the Hammerklavier Sonata), and the Haydn Variations of Brahms. With a few exceptions the transfers were exceptionally well done and they sold well, even in a sound-conscious age in which Toscanini, Walter, Furtwaengler, and Beecham were still recording.

By 1957 and the advent of stereo, however, those LPs began to disappear, and despite attempts by Columbia to keep at least some of them available (the Beethoven and Brahms symphonies on the low-priced Entré and Harmony lines respectively), the last Weingartner disc - LM 4776, Leopold and W. A. Mozart - was deleted in 1964. Ironically, only a single acoustic - the "Willow Song" from Verdi's Otello, one of the 1913 series with Lucille Marcel, survived commercially, on ML 6099, "The Boston Opera Company." For a while one could get the Liszt Piano Concerti with Emil von Sauer and the Vienna versions of Beethoven's 8th and 9th symphonies on imported "Great Recordings of the Century" discs, but not after the late '60s. By 1970 Weingartner's name had disappeared from the American record market for the first time in almost sixty years. The recent reissue of a number of his recordings will therefore make this extraordinary artist accessible for the first time to a considerable number of

listeners who do not have the 78s or early LPs, and we'll discuss Christopher Dymont's study of the conductor after a brief look at the reissues.

With the exception of his first two records, made for HMV in Vienna in 1910, Weingartner was a Columbia artist throughout his career, and that was fortunate. He avoided all overt display in his conducting, working instead with a subtly varied single tempo (or carefully chosen group of tempi), enlivened by a rhythmic sense of extraordinary vitality; when his sensitive handling of phrasing and tonal color were added, one had performances with a nearly unique combination of textual fidelity, structural cohesion, emotional eloquence, and easy, natural flow. Such subtlety demands good reproduction if it is to make its effect, and that is what Weingartner got, particularly in the late 1920s when he made many of his most important recordings. Columbia was then achieving sound of a clarity, depth, and tonal accuracy equalled perhaps by no one else, and when those records are added to the later discs we have a body of recordings which have preserved Weingartner's art unusually well. Because of this, a truly excellent transfer to LP is necessary if we are to hear the conductor's subtlety as it exists on the original 78s.

This is what has been achieved on Parnassus 6, which contains Weingartner's 1929 recording of Mendelssohn's Third Symphony (the "Scottish") and the second of his three recordings of the Beethoven Eighth, recorded in 1927 (available from Parnassus Records, P. O. Box 281, Phoenicia, N. Y. 12464, \$7.00). Both performances are with the old (pre-Beecham) Royal Philharmonic, and neither has been on LP before. The Mendelssohn has been regarded as a classic of the phonograph for years; deleted by Columbia in the mid-1940's because of the then-contemporary Mitropoulos/Minneapolis version, its unique combination of straightforwardness and poetry have made it much sought after. The Beethoven is perhaps the hardest to find of Weingartner's 1927 Beethoven Centennial sets (he also recorded numbers 5, 6, 7, and 9; the rest were done by others), and those who are familiar only with the 1935 Vienna version, which was transferred to Columbia by both American Columbia and E.M.I., will find this a surprising contrast in its rapid tempi. The LP transfer on Parnassus 6, engineered by Steven Smolian, is remarkable: in both cases, A-B comparisons with Viva-Tonal copies of the 78s revealed virtually no difference in range, color, or detail. The pitch problems that plague early Columbia electrics - particularly the Beethoven, in this case - have been adjusted, the side-joins cannot be heard, and shellac surface noise, while present, is minimal. Because there is a lot of music on the disc the levels are low, but the LP surfaces are silent. Seven pages of notes are included, four by Christopher Dymont (of whom more later), and the producer, Leslie Gerber, has not only listed all recording details but one or two technical problems in the originals of the Mendelssohn. In short, this record is honest, both to the purchaser and to Felix Weingartner.

If you have the 78s this will be an excellent adjunct to them; if you're new to Weingartner and wish to sample his art with one record, this is the one to seek out.

The same cannot be said of the transfer of the Mendelssohn which has also appeared on IGI-336, (available through the Bruno Walter Society, division of Educational Media Associates of America, P. O. Box 921, Berkeley, California 94701 and at certain record stores). The sound has been heavily filtered; both highs and lows have been attenuated and with them has gone the extraordinary sense of presence and depth captured on the originals. Shellac surface noise remains high. The side-joins appear to have been cut and spliced rather than electronically overlapped; this can often work, but not when, as Weingartner does, the conductor stops with a full chord which he doesn't repeat at the beginning of the following side: one either has a clumsy join or no chord, and here one has clumsy joins. The movements, which Mendelssohn specified to be played without pause, are separated by about fifteen seconds of silence. The Wagner Siegfried Idyll, made almost a decade later, had more immediate and spacious sound than the Mendelssohn, and that is reflected here, but the filtering has again unpleasantly veiled the warm winds and upper strings of the 78s. There are no notes of any kind. Not much of a bargain, and those seeking the Mendelssohn will be better off with the Parnassus, especially since they'll get the equally scarce Beethoven rather than the Siegfried Idyll, which is fairly common on 78 and appeared for a while on Columbia ML 4680.

There is more hard-to-find Weingartner Beethoven on a recent Mack LP. Included are the little known 1932 Symphony Number 5 with the British Symphony Orchestra; the Overture for the "Consecration of the House" and Eleven Viennese Dances (both LPO, 1938); and the Overture for "The Creatures of Prometheus" (LPO, 1933). (MACK 001, available from Mack Records, P. O. Box 315, Allendale, N. J. 07401, \$7.00). In the concert hall Weingartner was probably more famous for his Beethoven performances than anything else, and the emotional warmth, straightforward simplicity, and unforced rhythmic propulsion that made it so distinctive is fully in evidence here. This is the third of his four recordings of the symphony. Replaced only by American Columbia (Masterworks set 178), it was replaced after about one year by the 1933 version with the London Philharmonic, and is so obscure that Clough and Cuming failed to list it in the first volume of "World's Encyclopaedia of Recorded Music." The LPO version is the best known of all four because of its long 78 rpm life and subsequent transfer to LP; but this one deserves attention because although it shares with the later recording three movements of great power, that power carries here through the finale, as it did not with the LPO version. This, then, is arguably a better representation of Weingartner's way with the score (although a reissue of the possibly even more intense Royal Philharmonic set would also be welcome). Of the other items, the

Viennese Dances go with exquisite grace, and the "Consecration of the House" remains a classic solution to the problems (mainly of structure) that this piece presents; there is no better example of Weingartner's ability to make something flow with absolute ease than other conductors generally make sound clumsy. The LPO Overture for "The Creatures of Prometheus" is also a little known duplication (Columbia transferred the 1935 Vienna Philharmonic version onto ML 4647 with four other Beethoven overtures), and like the symphony a case might be made for its superiority; the woodwind playing is brilliant and the closer recording results in more audible detail in the strings. Considerable care has obviously been taken to present all this unusual material well. There has been no treble attenuation (some may in fact want to cut the highs a bit) and the equipment used to make the transfers is described in the enclosed booklet, which also contains a chronology of Weingartner's life and quotations from his writings. There is some pitch waver in what amounts to the first side of the symphony's slow movement and in "Consecration of the House", but although regrettable it is not so severe as to prevent enjoyment of the performances — performances which in any case will be highly desirable for many people.

Two other single LP's deserve to be included here although in contrast to the foregoing they have been available for some time. Both are EMI products: Liszt's two piano concerti, with Emil von Sauer and the Paris Conservatory Orchestra conducted by Weingartner (Da Capo 1C 053-01 458 M, available through Peters International), and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3, again with the Paris Conservatory Orchestra but with Marguerite Long as soloist (Japanese Angel GR-2196, available either by import from Japan or at certain stores in larger cities, such as Darton's in New York). Both Sauer and Weingartner were Liszt pupils, and their recordings of the concerti have long been famous. They are strikingly slow, in contrast to most of Weingartner's work on records, and there has always been speculation that Sauer's age may have caused the two to settle on these tempi, but no one seems to have settled the question. The performances have much to offer, in any case, and the Da Capo transfers sound very good — lacking somewhat the color of the 78s but still full and clean. These are obviously the same transfers which were once available on French Columbia COLC-81 and appeared in this country briefly as an import about a dozen years ago; those who missed it the first time around will want it this time, because although the 78s of Concerto No. 1 were issued in this country, those of No. 2 never were and they are hard to come by.

The 78s of the Beethoven Concerto are even harder to find. They never appeared anywhere but in France, which was also the scene of the only previous LP issue. The Japanese LP thus makes available what may be the rarest commercial recording from the last decade of Weingartner's recording career. He was acclaimed throughout his life as a brilliant accompanist, and his skill can be heard here not only in his propulsive and uniquely-phrased handling of the orchestral

part but in the way he molds it to the playing of Mme. Long, which contains liberties of tempo and phrase one might expect Weingartner to have found inadmissible. Unfortunately the transfer is problematic. At least on the pressing I obtained (XLX-157/8, 1S-1S) the orchestral introduction (side 1 of the 78s) is in the correct C minor, but with the entrance of the piano -- 78 rpm side two -- the pitch rises approximately a quarter-tone and stays there throughout the performance. The 78s do not have this problem, despite occasional minor pitch fluctuations which quickly disappear. The 78s also have cleaner, fuller sound, although not as good as the other records Weingartner made in Paris at this time (i.e., Preludes to Act 3 of Tannhauser and Tristan und Isolde).

There is one final reissue to consider, a new one and undoubtedly the most important since the American Columbia series of the 1950s: "The Art of Felix Weingartner", issued last summer by EMI (British HMV RLS 717, 3 records -- available through Peters International). Weingartner had broad sympathies in the concert hall; and although not all of them were captured on records (he begged for years to be allowed to record the Schubert Great C Major, and frequently played Debussy and Dukas) his recorded repertory is large and ranges from Bach, Handel and Mozart through all of the standard German classics and on to Berlioz, Johann Strauss, Liszt, Wagner, and (in snippet form) Verdi, Boccherini, Tchaikovsky, plus some of his own pieces. A really wide sampling of his art hasn't been available for years, so one must be grateful for this set, which was obviously planned to represent as many facets of his art as possible within the six available sides. Beethoven is represented by the "Eroica" and the Leonore No. 2 and Ruins of Athens Overtures; Brahms by the Second Symphony; Wagner by the Rienzi Overture and Preludes to Acts 3 of Tannhauser and Tristan. Of Liszt there are "Les Preludes" and the "Mephisto Waltz"; of Handel, the Dream Music from Alcina; and of Johann Strauss, two waltzes -- Voices of Spring and Wine, Women and Song.

Choosing from the considerable bulk of Weingartner's discography cannot have been easy, and for the most part the task was done well. No one coming to Weingartner for the first time through these discs will fail to be overwhelmed by the taut yet supple power of the Eroica, the mercurial warmth of the Brahms, or the intense feeling of atmosphere which informs the Tristan music; and the way in which Weingartner combines the seemingly opposite qualities of simplicity and rhetorical power in the Liszt pieces and Rienzi overture is unique in the history of recording. The only possible complaint about the contents is the inclusion of two Strauss waltzes instead of the companion 78 for the Alcina Dream sequence -- the Ballet music; still if Weingartner's performances of Strauss were not Viennese in the way of Walter or Krauss, they had a captivating lilt and serve to remind one again of his links to the musical world of the composer's own time and, later, to Strauss's city of Vienna. Unfortunately the highs in this set have the oddly nasal sound of an

equalizer unsubtly applied, and the sense of clarity and presence which makes the 78s sonically outstanding for their time is missing. In view of EMI's recent achievements with Elgar, Patti, and others, this is a disappointment, and those with the originals will find no improvements here; but those seeking an introduction to Weingartner have the best selection they've had in years — and even the most experienced collectors will benefit from the remarkable perceptive notes and the full Weingartner discography, by Christopher Dymont, in the accompanying leaflet.

That leaflet held forth promise of a more extended Weingartner discography by Mr. Dymont, "soon to be published by Triad Press", and that promise has now been kept, handsomely, in a volume entitled "Felix Weingartner: Recollections and Recordings" which not only contains an exhaustive discography but comments about the conductor by his contemporaries and numerous photographs of him on and off the podium. As Mr. Dymont points out in his "Editor's Note" he has assembled the first significant publication about Weingartner since the conductor's autobiography, "Buffets and Rewards", was published in English in 1937; and in doing so he has assembled a remarkable book which no one interested in historical recordings, let alone Weingartner, should miss (available from Theodore Front Musical Literature, 131 N. Robertson Blvd., Beverly Hills, California 90211, or from Parnassus Records, \$15).

Mr. Dymont, whose name is already familiar from his exhaustive Albert Coates discography, recently published in "Recorded Sound", is clearly as much a musical scholar as he is a discographer, and he has put his materials together with care and effect. The book is not a biography in the conventional sense — it is a study of Weingartner as a performing musician. Continuous detail of Weingartner's life and career is dispatched in a page and a half by his fifth and last wife, Carmen Weingartner-Studer, and the various controversies which surrounded the conductor are not dwelt upon (such as whether he was better in the concert hall, as some said, or whether many people plotted against him as he said). Instead Mr. Dymont has compiled a rich series of recollections by musicians who played under Weingartner and by a pupil, Stewart Deas. The essays are not only fascinating as a glimpse of the man but extraordinarily complementary: we read about Weingartner in rehearsal, in performance, backstage. Leon Goossens tells about the time Weingartner let his young wife (in fact, Carmen Weingartner-Studer) conduct the LPO at a recording session; Ralph Nicholson mentions the time Weingartner refused to rehearse the London Symphony for a recording of the Brahms First Symphony, having given an incandescent performance with them the night before.

Thus the book is not merely a collection of anecdotes but a fascinating compilation of personal recollections by musicians who are able to criticize, praise, appraise, and compare Weingartner with other conductors. As a whole the essays offer a picture not only of

Weingartner but of music and recording in his time -- and of his place in it.

The discography that occupies just less than half of the book is a model of its kind, so rich, in fact, that it can only be quickly outlined here. Recording sessions, dates, locations, matrix numbers, LP and 78 catalogue numbers, released and unreleased takes, and the bars of score covered per 78 rpm side are given. Subsequent notes detail soloists, the instrumentation used at each session, any mechanical flaws (such as pitch variations) and any changes in released matrices from country to country. Mr. Dymant has tracked down some extremely obscure recordings; even advanced collectors may be surprised to find that Weingartner recorded the "Dance of the Sprites" from his Incidental Music for "The Tempest" and Johann Strauss II's "Wine, Women and Song" in Basel in the late 'twenties (they were released only in Switzerland and Japan, respectively). Unreleased recordings are also listed in detail (including one not mentioned in the HMV box, the Venusberg Music from Tannhauser, made in London in 1939), as are projects planned but not brought to fruition (such as Liszt's Tasso). Subsequent tables list all of Weingartner's piano rolls (which are numerous) and such live recordings as are known to exist. Because of their relative similarity as interpreters, Mr. Dymant has also compiled a table of comparative timings between selected Weingartner and Toscanini recordings, pointing out at the same time the differences between their styles. There are also four pages of carefully chosen stills from a 1932 film of Weingartner conducting the Overture to Weber's Der Freischutz for which Mr. Dymant has supplied captions which enable the reader to pinpoint Weingartner's gestures in relation to the music, and thus get a good idea of how he looked on the podium. To all of this is added an outstandingly perceptive analysis of his own of Weingartner's conducting style.

Finally, we are given a sample of Weingartner the author (a life-long activity) in the form of the first English publication since 1898 of his essay "Bayreuth 1876-1896", most welcome and fascinating reading for all Wagnerians. It is not only in our time that the Bayreuth Festival has been troubled, and Weingartner's personal recollections are mandatory reading for those interested in how the Wagner operas have been performed through the years.

This is, then, not just a book for those interested in Felix Weingartner: it is a book for everyone interested in the history of musical performance and recording. It is an extraordinary achievement, and one can only hope that Mr. Dymant will follow it with more.

One also can hope that its appearance, together with the reissue of a sizable number of Weingartner's recordings, presages a resurgence of interest which will restore more of his work on records to currency. Few conductors possessed such remarkable gifts or contributed as much to the musical life of their times, and fewer still have left behind

a recorded legacy which -- as Weingartner's does -- continues to impress those who come to it anew and enrich those who return to it again and again.

---Don Tait