

RCA REISSUES

For this bi-centennial year RCA has chosen to reissue a group of solidly American "historic recordings," and it is good to be reassured by the Victrola label and the reappearance of what was once the world's most famous trademark that the former things have not altogether passed away.

At the head of the list is a collection of no less than twenty-one spirituals sung in arrangements by Hall Johnson, Harry T. Burleigh, John Payne, Lawrence Brown and Edward Boatner, by Marian Anderson with Franz Rupp at the piano. Recorded in May 1947 and May 1952, these were originally issued on two ten-inch discs, LM 110 and LRM 7006. They were later combined on a twelve-inch disc as LM 2032. Though made late in her career, they show the singer in good voice and fervent spirits. For a single sitting this may seem like a lot of spirituals; I recommend it rather as an anthology to be dipped into (providing one does not mind getting up and locating the individual bands). Many of the best loved spirituals are here - Deep river, Go down, Moses, Were you there?, Crucifixion, etc. (AVM1-1735.)

Many of us remember the Stephen Foster songs appealingly sung by Richard Crooks with Frank LaForge at the piano, originally issued in an album of five ten-inch 78's as M-354. It was reissued on LP as Camden CAL 124. Some of my pleasure on rehearing the set is dampened by The Balladeers, a male quartet who provide occasional backgrounds, but Crooks was a fine singer and his was a lovely voice. In some of the livelier refrain songs the quartet is appropriate enough, but in quieter moods harmonized humming becomes a bit corny. If one were to pick the ten most famous Foster songs one would come up with something very like this selection - Old folks at home, Beautiful dreamer, I dream of Jeanie, My old Kentucky home, etc. (AVM1-1738.)

A selection from Porgy and Bess was inevitable in this series, and the "cast" here presented is nothing if not star-studded, Steber, Merrill, Stevens, Tibbett, Jepson - with Cab Calloway thrown in and the Shaw Chorale in attendance. What can I say, except that if you like this sort of thing you will undoubtedly like this disc? (AVM1-1742.)

Hardly less of an American institution is Show Boat, and the Kern score is treated with more of the common touch than Gershwin's. Along with the operatic voices of Merrill, Munsel, Kirsten and Stevens, we find such "musical" types as Janet Pavek, Howard Keel, Gigi Grant and Kevin Scott. And, to give the whole thing a hallmark, Paul Robeson and Helen Morgan. Robeson did not sing in the original production (though he was originally scheduled to do so), but Helen Morgan was the real showstopper. If the recordings of Can't help lovin' dat man and Bill do not fully succeed in bringing her back, they are important documents none the less. Robeson's Ol' man river inevitably became one of the "Victor records that should be in every home," and it very nearly was. (AVM1-1741.)

Two slices of American patriotism take us back to the thirties; I wonder if anyone who did not live through that period can quite "get" the John Latouche-Earl Robinson Ballad for Americans, or George Kleinsinger's I hear America singing, set to words of Walt Whitman. Those were the days of the great Depression, but they were days of hope; it seemed as though, certain lessons once learned, we would go on to better times. Some saw the new day dawning in Russia; others believed our salvation would come by our own democratic processes. The great voice of Paul Robeson was a spokesman for the leftish point of view; he was the inevitable choice to sing the Ballad. Others have performed it since, but none quite so convincingly. John Charles Thomas, on the other hand, was no proletarian. His popular success in opera and concert guaranteed a wide audience, and he too could show his patriotism singing the Whitman text. If neither of these once stirring cantatas seems particularly important today, they remain a part of our history. Robeson is assisted by the American People's Chorus, of which Earl Robinson was the director, and Thomas by the ILGWU Radio Chorus, directed by Simon Rady. In both cases the conductor was Nathaniel Shilkret. (AVM1-1736.)

Leaving the American scene for two more Victrola releases, we find Victoria de los Angeles singing Debussy's La demoiselle élue and Berlioz's Nuits d'été, and Eileen Farrell doing the Wesendonck songs of Wagner and, with Set Svanholm, the final scene of Siegfried. Under the sympathetic direction of Charles Munch, de los Angeles sings with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, assisted in the Debussy by Carol Smith, contralto, and the Radcliffe Choral Society. The soprano's melting voice was never lovelier. I make only one complaint: I have to stretch my ears, especially in the Berlioz, to understand the texts, and no word-sheet is supplied. (AVM1-1412.)

I confess to some disappointment coming back to Farrell's Wagner. When the Wesendonck-Lieder were first issued I remember finding them quite exciting, principally, perhaps, because of Stokowski's orchestra. They seem a little less so now, though the voice is quite magnificent in itself. Somehow the performance does not quite take fire. The Siegfried duet, conducted by Leinsdorf, is in a special way revealing. Here the admirable American soprano is singing with a well-seasoned Wagnerian. Though she may be the superior vocalist, it is he who knows how to make the text tell. (AVM1-1413.)

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