

RECORD REVIEW

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ANNOUNCING: A Record Album of Fantasy Music

Most fantasy fans, as the Fancyclopedia complacently notes, are music lovers; and a surprising number of them are composers as well. Among the latter there has been considerable correspondence and swapping of scores, but generally speaking fans have had little opportunity to meet the work done by the musical among them. The Slan Shackers are the proud owners of a home recording of Walt Liebscher's American Futurama - now sadly worn by its enthusiasts - but they represent the largest group in fandom which can claim acquaintanceship with the piece, which certainly deserves much better. Similarly, an ape mailing included a copy of James Blish's musical setting of Cyril Kornbluth's Cry In the Night, but since not many people can read music well the main question of "Is it any good?" must remain widely unanswered.

For these reasons it is a pleasure to be able to announce the forthcoming appearance of an album of music of interest to fantasy fans. Liebscher's American Futurama will be included, as performed by its composer; Harry Warner, Jr., one of fandom's most serious and gifted musicians, will be represented, as will Blish; Albert Galpin's Lament for H.P.L., which was printed in the Arkham edition of the Marginalia, is to be included; the company has asked Chandler Davis for a representative composition; and this does not by any means finish the list. The complete album, which will bear the title Vanguard Society Set Number One, will consist of six records - 12 sides - electrically produced, bound in a colorful album, and accompanied by a pamphlet giving details of each work and its composer. These discs will be the equals of the very best French studio recordings as to tone; they will be cast upon a glass base, of standard weight and 10-inch diameter; and the performances, when they are not by the composer himself, will be by experienced and thoroughly capable concert artists. This is the first time anything of this nature has ever been attempted in fandom, despite the wide enthusiasm for music which exists in the fan cosmos; and it is not an exaggeration to say that these records are phenomenal under the circumstances.

The Set will be sold by subscription, and will cost \$6.50. It will be sent out in two sections, the first section to consist of the first three records, the album, and the pamphlet, the second of the succeeding three discs. In view of this issuing procedure, the Company has agreed to instalment payments - \$3.50 initially, and \$3.00 upon the publication of the final three records - at the subscriber's option. No specific date has yet been announced for shipping the albums; the date is contingent upon the rate at which the subscriptions are received.

Beyond the success of the initial album, the issuance of a number of other records of interest to fans depends upon how great the response is to Set #1. The Usher quartet has expressed interest in the new Company, and if the first Set proves popular, some of the more extensive compositions of fans may easily find their way onto succeeding discs; furthermore, the Company plans to include in Set #1 a preference coupon, through which the music most popular among the album's purchasers will be selected for publication. The opportunity is thus doubled - fans may own a substantial part of the music of the greatest interest to them, and at the same time give the composers of that music a substantial boost toward future recognition.

Only a limited number of the first Sets are to be printed. If you want one, send your \$3.50 to Jim Blish or Doc Lowndes at once.

THE STEINER QUESTION

Max Steiner: Symphonie Moderne, upon a theme by Max Rabinowitsch. Werner Janssen and the Janssen Symphony of Los Angeles. Victor 11-8311

It is time to repeat publically in the loudest possible voice that Max Steiner is a poor damned hack of a composer not worth ten minutes of anyone's time, and that his feeble post-Wagnerianisms, representing as they do the total aesthetics of Hollywood music, are exceeded only by Freddy Martin in their corruption of the public taste. Lately voices have been heard from various points defending Steiner, first on the grounds that he is an excellent technician, particularly in orchestration, and second that it is unfair to judge him except by the music he himself considers good. (We are curious to meet someone who has bothered to ask Steiner this latter question.) These voices are accessories after the fact of taste-corruption, and V-R herewith undertakes to shoot them one at a time.

Entirely aside from the fact that the merest tyro of a young student of orchestration can produce novel "effects" by the bucketful, a minute's study shows that Steiner isn't really very good at doing even that. Nine tenths of his orchestral tones are borrowed from Richard Strauss without so much as a murmur of thanks, and the remainder can be split three ways - 4% Tchaikowski, 3% Debussy, 3% Maxl himself. Deeper plumbing of the excellent Steiner technique is as fruitless. Instead of a competent technician we find a man who never had an original harmonic idea in his life, whose best melody was written by another Max entirely, whose dramatic technique of neatly labelling each character and situation in the movie with an appropriate leitmotif was nothing very new in the days when Wagner decided to use it; we find fifteen sterile years wherein he was unable to think of any other method or vary the pumping of this one handle so much as a stroke; we find Maxl-only-knows how many scores over that period, all alike, all meticulously fitted to the worst Hollywood formula (as set forth, for instance, by Oscar Levant) with apparently complete unconsciousness of the success with which Copland, Korngold, Toch and others were breaking free of it.

And given the scores for Robin Hood, The Hound of the Baskervilles, or Things To Come, can one any longer allow Steiner to hide behind the excuse of irksome subject matter? We doubt that Toch much enjoyed being put in a pigeon-hole and told to write "screwy music," but he did very well all the same, being an artist. An even more pointed comparison may be made between the operatic scene Bernard Herrman wrote for Citizen Kane, and the Steiner opus on this record, which was written for Four Wives. The Symphonie Moderne was supposed to be great music, according to the picture's plot; it was allowed to run without interruption; it was not part of the cinema's normal requirements for "mood-music."

What did Steiner make of this opportunity? Did he sit down and write a decent concert piece, putting into it everything he had? There is no way of telling whether he did or not; at any rate what he did write should be regarded at its face value, for the opportunity was there. Was it good music? It was not. It was Hollywood's usual idea of what great music should sound like, which means that it was the usual compost of Strauss, Wagner, Tchaikowski, etc., molasses and bombast bounded on one side by a catnip ecstasy and on the other by a sort of orgasm. It is also, in V-R's judgement, Steiner's idea of what good music should sound like; else, why did he allow this disc to be issued?

This is rather heavy artillery to unlimber against a stuffed doll, but Herr Steiner is representative of an enormous segment of American artists who have complained that the conditions under which they work are responsible for their poor output. It is V-R's contention that an artist should not have to excuse himself. If he does

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AN OPEN LETTER

To Mr. Olin Downes, concerning Elmer Davis' The Imperfect Wagnerite (Harper's Magazine, 9/35) which Mr. Downes eulogized in his column in the New York Times, Sunday, March 12, 1944

Dear Sir:

After reading your quotations from The Imperfect Wagnerite, I am convinced that Mr. Davis is as perfect a Wagnerite as Shaw ever was. After all, what is the perfect Wagnerite but a man who feels that Wagner can do no wrong, and that the Ring means the same simple thing all the way through?

While reading Mr. Davis' very clever allegory and admiring the patness of his comparisons, I became conscious of a feeling of faint discomfort which I was at first at a loss to place. It reminded me of the way I felt when I first looked into Bruce Barton's The Man Nobody Knows. As soon as I made that connection I recognized my sensation; it was the annoyance I always feel when I encounter somebody trying to explain a self-sufficient entity in terms of something else, something simpler - whether it be Barton selling me Christ as the ideal American business man, an astronomer, juggling billiard balls and locomotives in an attempt to put relativity into non-mathematical terms, or Mr. Davis blaming the murder of Siegfried on his ineptness as an after-dinner speaker. Perhaps I should not feel annoyed, for Mr. Davis has done me no injury; yet the bumptiousness of assuming that the message it takes Wagner four operas to communicate could be summed up in a few thousand words seems to me to be grounds for a certain peevishness on my part. There is the viewpoint of the Perfect Wagnerite in a nearly pristine state; the idea that the Ring is simple enough to be restated in terms of any old ingenuous two-cylinder idea you happen to think up while dozing through the Walkuerenritt. Considering the realms of interpretive prose $3\frac{1}{2}$ minutes of jazz can generate, I am flabbergasted that even A Shaw should presume to summarize the emotional implications of some 17 straight hours of Wagner. For a more recent illustration of where such Sunday-supplement aesthetics can lead, I call

your attention to the cartoons of Arthur Szyk; this gentleman has decided to explain away the century-long and nearly universal influence of Wagner by labeling him a Nazi (yes, the same Wagner who wrote Art and Democracy and was exiled for joining an unsuccessful rebellion against a tyrant of his own day!)

I have a suspicion that as you were abstracting Mr. Davis' remarks for your column, you too may have felt an uneasiness, even if it did not spring from quite the same source. In reading a commentary on any major work of art, it is usual for most of us to wonder, almost automatically, "What would the artist have thought of this?" In the present case this obtrusive question tends to be pushed aside by the reader in favor of the smoothly-reasoned argument of the commentary, but after this initial interest has been satisfied, it comes back; it remains always in the subconscious. In some matters of this kind it is fairly easy to avoid the question, for the composer has previously written so much foolishness about his own and other people's music that the reader would not consider him a competent critic even of a criticism - yet even in such instances, it is uneasy that we tell ourselves that the commentator knows more about the work of art than the man who produced it. And in Wagner's case we lack even this excuse, for, despite a bit of mystical prettles contingent upon his subject matter, he was one of the most brilliant critics and aestheticians of his age.

What would Wagner have thought of Hagen's motivations as Davis indicates them? Of Davis' sordid avoidance of Bruennhilde as a factor in the emotional complex, and of his denial by implication of Wotan's plans for her and Siegfried; of the importance of the change in her nature which occurred on the rock Davis calls "country life?" Of his dismissal of Erda, one of Wagner's four al-

chemical elements, as just another extramarital affair, where the composer made a painstaking differentiation between that relationship and the others he declared Wotan to have had? The list, of course, could go into much greater detail, especially since you've added a few omissions of your own to Davis', but as it stands it indicates some of the major facets of the drama to which Mr. Davis' facile "interpretation" gives no key whatsoever. The Elemental notion is predominant in the Ring; it has its own motive as well as separate themes for each of its components; the conflict between the principals and these natural forces is a counterplot of vast implications - yet Fire is dismissed as "a smart lawyer," Water is not mentioned at all, Earth is "that widow," and one seventh of the Air symbols is referred to offhandedly as "a remarkable woman." After this it is superfluous to point out that the interrelationships are excluded. And finally, to conclude this table of by-passed objectives: where, in Mr. Davis' analysis of the Ring, is the Ring?

These are details, true enough, and

mostly not essential to Mr. Davis' argument, but for that very reason Mr. Davis' argument is not Wagner's, and cannot be ticketed so confidently as a blanket explanation of Why We Listen To Wagner.

No, the Ring is not a Marxian treatise, a remote heroic legend, a moral allegory, alone - nor is it, alone, a story of the Average Man. It is nothing so simple; it is nothing so simple as a combination of all of these. If I were asked to produce a dogma of my own about it, I would say that it is a model of succinctness nearly throughout. Whatever Wagner had to say in it is already stated in its simplest intelligible terms; out of many uncertainties one word about it may stand safely - that were the ideas statable in any shorter form, there would be no Ring. The Szyks of the planet would have to seek another playground for their facile notions.

I look forward with somewhat sadistic eagerness to an explanation by Mr. Davis of Why We Listen To Pelléas et Mélisande.

THE STEINER QUESTION (Cont. from p. 2)

hackwork it is by his own election, and he should not hide behind the people who paid him for the result, not even if they ordered it. The list of literary masterpieces written to boil the pot would fill this page; and Wagner changed Tannhäuser radically to satisfy a group of Parisian ignoramuses, without in the least compromising the integrity of his music. When the day comes that the artist feels that the movie studio or wherever else he is working is interfering with the quality of his output, that is the day for him to put down his pen or his brush and quit; or, if he must stay there anyhow and work because he needs the money, nothing is simpler than signing your poor work with a non-de-plume.

V-R advises that if anyone offers to play She (15 sides) or the Symphonie Moderne (2 sides) to you, precipitate yourself at once under the wheels of the B.M.T.

REVIEWS IN BRIEF

Recent releases include a Rodzinski-NY-Philharmonic recording of Tchaikowski's Sixth Symphony (Columbia M-558) and an Ormandy-Philadelphia version of the Beethoven Seventh (Columbia M-557.) Both are well-performed and well recorded, but not in any way markedly superior to three or four other versions of the same two works. The new Melchior album (Victor DM-979) is in all ways excellent; but since it consists entirely of re-issues you may find that it duplicates some of your previous purchases.

Unlike these three albums, none of the music in Vanguard Society Set No. 1 has ever been recorded before for public circulation. Make sure of your copy now.