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New Recordings

THE GOOD LISTENER

A Monthly Review by
OWEN JENSEN

MUSIC needs the listener, if he is a good listener; and good listening is an art in itself, the final contribution, in fact, to the process of making music. Leaving out the physical production of the sounds, there is as much perception and skill required for listening as for performance, but achievement is much more difficult to assess. It is easy enough to pick the bad performer, but many a listener bluffs his way through. The gramophone has given the listener much more opportunity for practice—and developed more bad listeners to good music than would have seemed possible. The static quality of the gramophone record—it always plays back exactly the same—may tend to inhibit anything in the way of creative listening, and the very ubiquity of the machine may easily take the edge off the ear and atrophy the aural sense.

All this has been said before, but it comes up again as new recordings of old works continue to appear to question the listener's faith in his stock performance. There is, for instance, another recording of Bach's Suite No. 6 in D Major for Unaccompanied 'Cello, a work that may leave many a listener cold but which is the genuine essence of music to the Bach lover or the enthusiast for 'cello playing. The new playing is by Amadeo Baldovina (Supraphon LPM 63). One cannot resist harking back to the classic performance of Casals with a sidelong remembering of Nixa's recent Janos Starker recording. The Supraphon record packet rather gives the show away and prepares one for rather less than the best when it says: "Bach suites for violoncello are very difficult to perform. Only the greatest living 'cellist, Pablo Casals, successfully overcame this difficulty." That being so, Amadeo Baldovina will hardly mind if we agree.

After all these years there is still a living quality and a breathless perfection about the Bach Society Casals recording. Nevertheless, I am not sure that it is altogether a good thing to live continually with this perfection—even if you can come by the record at all these days. If Baldovina's technique does not always measure up to Bach's Everest, there is musicianship in his striving and enjoyment in going with him. So it comes to this: Casals, if you can acquire him, for perfection of interpretations; Starker (on Nixa) for straightout technique; and Baldovina (Supraphon) for an intelligent and sincere approach to Bach.

Comparing performances, one can hardly speak so enthusiastically about the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra's *Harold in Italy* (Berlioz) with Ladislav Cerny as solo viola (Supraphon LPM 830). There is little joy in L. Cerny's striving, even though the orchestra carries him along nobly. This disc—or rather two ten-inch discs—is not a patch on Columbia's William Prim-

rose-Royal Philharmonic Orchestra-Sir Thomas Beecham version (*Listener Review*, July, 1953). The Czech Philharmonic Orchestra (conductor, Jean Meylan) comes out better in a performance of Manuel de Falla's ballet music *El Amor Brujo* (*Love the Sorcerer*) (Supraphon LPM 20). The Czech players infuse the music with drive and warmth, more so than is found in the performance by Ataúlfo Argenta and the Orchestra de la Societe des Concerts du Conservatoire (Columbia 33C1004). But what you lose on the roundabout is picked up on the swing, for the Columbia is a more complete version with some really beautiful singing by Ana-Maria Iriarte. The Czech disc has a sensitive playing of Debussy's *Fetes* as a fill-up.

The Moussorgsky Mystery

The Ducretet-Thomson-Selmer catalogue lists Moussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death*, sung by Vladimir Resnik, with, on the reverse side, Nassja Berowska singing the same composer's *Nursery Songs* (LPG 8677). This is what the label says, but not quite what the music reports. In fact, it is a trap for the careless reviewer—or for any listener not on his toes. Even now I am not sure whether I have the matter straightened out. This is how it goes. No. 1 of *Songs and Dances of Death* should be *Trepak*. It isn't. This is *Ballade*, by Moussorgsky. Then follows *Trepak*. *Death's Lullaby* should be next. It isn't. The third track turns out to be *Field-Marshal Death*, the last of the set. The *Lullaby* is the last song on side 1. *Death's Serenade*, which should be the third song, is sung on the other side by Nassja Berowska before she warms up on the *Nursery Songs*.

This is all a little confusing, and seems an extraordinarily bad bit of pressing. However, once you have sorted out death's various manifestations—and realised, too, that you have an extra unlisted song for the money—you will find the music magnificent, and the singing quite moving. Vladimir Resnik, a bass, has the voice for the music, and, if he does occasionally slide round a note instead of hitting it clear in the middle, his interpretation brings out the strength of the songs. Nassja Berowska sings the *Serenade* and the *Nursery Songs* beautifully.

The *Songs and Dances of Death* have also been recorded recently by Decca
(continued on next page)



(C) Punch