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New Recordings

Postscript to Romanticism

A monthly review by
OWEN JENSEN

ABOUT the year 1908 the composer Arnold Schoenberg began to compose in a new style which eventually crystallised into what has come to be known as the twelve-tone system. "The method of composing with twelve tones grew out of necessity," he wrote. A significant testimony of that necessity is to be found in Schoenberg's vast musical canvas *Gurre-Lieder*, written between 1901 and 1911. With a huge orchestra of over 140 players, a large choir, five soloists and narrator, Schoenberg outdoes the Romantics in romantic imagery. All that he admired—Mahler, Brahms, whom he called "the Progressive," and Wagner, too—went into this music; but what came out is uniquely original, the apotheosis of the 19th Century. He had to find a new style of writing, for there was little more he could say in the old way.

Gurre-Lieder is the legend of Walde-mar's love for Tove and his lament for her. "Tis the hour of midnight, when unholy spirits do arise from their old-forgotten resting places," sings Walde-mar, and ends his aria with "And they vanish sighing, 'All our day is over.'" Schoenberg may have thought of this when he dotted the last notes of *Gurre-Lieder* in 1911 and turned to his new music. *Gurre-Lieder* might almost be an

elegy for the romantic fervour of the 19th Century. I would go so far as to say it is great music.

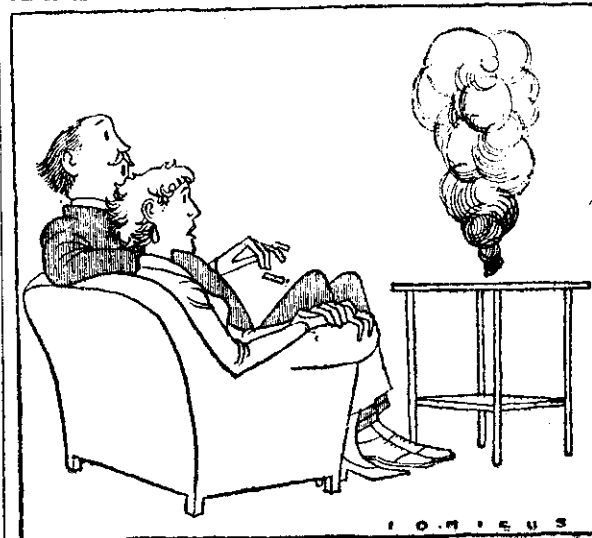
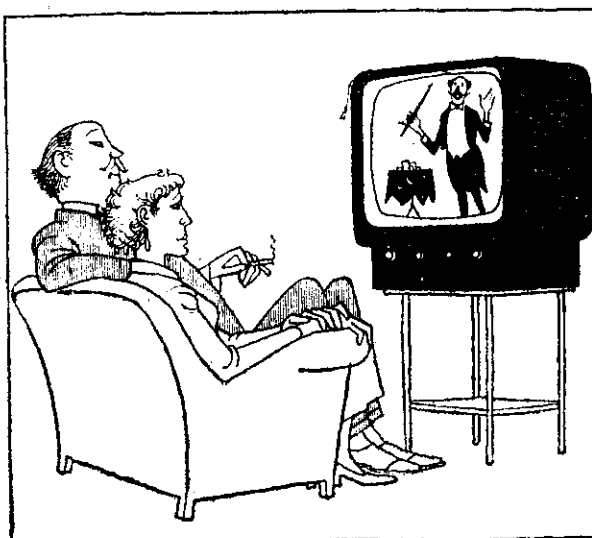
The performance by the Chorus and Orchestra of the New Symphony Society of Paris conducted by Rene Leibowitz (Nixa HLP 3100: 1-3) is magnificent. The soloists are fine, especially Richard Lewis as Waldemar. If you have a stake in the 20th Century and even a big toe wagging in the 19th, this performance is a must.

It is a big step down from the *Gurre-Lieder* as music to Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 3 in A Minor, Op. 44, and several steps up again to Symphony No. 3 in C Minor (with organ) by Saint-Saens. Rachmaninoff infuses some of his lush themes into his Symphony No. 3 and he demonstrates again his flair for making not very significant ideas exciting. One has a feeling, however, that much is due to the playing of the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent (H.M.V. ALP 1118), who make the music sound, perhaps, better than it is. Saint-Saens, on the other hand, has the ideas; and he knows what to do with them, too. He comes out in this music, indeed, as a composer of much more considerable stature than the more popular of his

works may have led one to believe. There is a detailed analysis of the work on the record cover, but its usefulness is rather diminished by the fact that none of the themes are quoted. Charles Munch produces rich tone from the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra of New York (Columbia 33CX 1116), who give a beautiful performance.

Rimsky-Korsakov's symphonic suite *Antar* is another aspect of the 19th Century, music that glitters with interest. The performance by the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Hermann Scherchen (Nixa NLP 910) is a brilliant one, excellently recorded. There is some especially beautiful wood-wind playing. The fill-up is Rimsky-Korsakov's *Russian Easter Festival Overture* by the same players and conductor.

In a welcome new playing of that well-roasted but still tasty chestnut among violin concertos, the Bruch No. 1 in G Minor, Heifetz recaptures the warmth without overdoing the sugar—a little more would have done no harm. The orchestra is the London Philharmonic conducted by Sargent



(C) Punch

N.Z. LISTENER, NOVEMBER 5, 1954.