

Rudolf von Laban has invented a thoroughly workable if difficult system of dance notation. It is here to be used if only there is someone sufficiently interested to devote himself to the task of mastering it and of collecting the vast amount of valuable material which annually disappears.

Here in America there is a fine handful of young dancers who move exceedingly well, whose creative gifts are too limited to serve them appropriately. With a repertoire based first on sturdy compositions masterfully made, these young dancers, should be able to interest a large public. Is there any doubt in the minds of musicians that Walter Gieseking, for example, probably plays Debussy's compositions better than Debussy himself played them? And in any case he *plays* them!

It is not enough for us here and now to pass through the experiences we are so frequently offered. We have an important condition to change. The movies might help. (Witness one dance of Fred Astaire's in *Top Hat* photographed by a stationary camera). But, however difficult the means, we must effect the change.

Lehman Engel

ACTIVE MARKET IN NEW MUSIC RECORDS

THE market in modern music phonograph recordings continues active. So much may be gathered from a mere glance at the announcements recently issued by three domestic companies. Since each month adds a few more selections to a fast-growing list of contemporary music recordings, we are probably safe in assuming the existence of a definite public willing to part with hard cash in order to own these selections.

Curiously little or nothing is known about these buyers of the new in music—who they are, where they live, what they like. It is necessary merely to visualize the polite boredom of a typical Friday afternoon symphony audience listening to a new work, in order to develop a certain affection for this new and intangible section of our public: the gramophone listeners.

Here is the list of offerings recently issued: RCA-Victor presents two master-works: Strauss' *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in a familiar reading of Koussevitzky's, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and Mahler's *Second Symphony* as recorded during

a public performance by the Minneapolis Symphony under the direction of Eugene Ormandy; also Honegger's *Concertino* for piano and small orchestra played by Eunice Norton and Ormandy's Minneapolis men. . . . Columbia's list includes two American works: Roy Harris' *A Song for Occupations*, sung by the Westminster Choir, and Bernard Wagenaar's *Sonatina* for 'cello and piano performed by Naoum Benditzky and the composer; foreign composers are represented by Constant Lambert's *The Rio Grande* for chorus, orchestra and piano, Poulenc's *Nocturnes* (Nos. 1, 2, 4) and *Improvisations* (Nos. 2, 5, 9, 10) for piano, played by the composer, and a Stravinsky-Dushkin arrangement for violin and piano of the *Berceuse* and *Scherzo* from *L'Oiseau de Feu*. . . . Finally, there are the New Music Quarterly Recordings, under the aegis of Henry Cowell, devoted exclusively to the American composer's interests. Some ten double-faced records have been issued thus far, the most recent releases including Walter Piston's *Three Pieces* for flute, clarinet, and bassoon played by the Barrère Ensemble; Richard Donovan's *Suite* for piano, performed by Edwin Gerschefski and *Two Songs* with string quartet sung by Grace Donovan, *Four Songs* by Otto Luening, and *Vocalize* by Aaron Copland, sung by Ethel Luening and accompanied by their respective composers.

There is something here for every taste and the poor reviewer can do little more than point out the high spots. The Honegger *Concertino* is one of the most delightful pieces in the modern repertoire and deserves to be heard more often in the concert hall. Miss Norton performs the solo part brilliantly, particularly in the final movement which contains some of the best French jazz we know. (The whip-like crackings in the brittle piano-part punctuating a long and sentimental jazz tune are not easily forgotten.) But the tempo of the middle part is hurried in order to crowd it on to the first side of the record.

In a similar vein, though more pretentious and less successful, is Lambert's *Rio Grande*. It's the type of music that can sound amusing if one is in the mood. But it has no power to *put* one in the mood. In a critical frame of mind, moreover, it can sound pretty empty: noisy, over-energetic and too eclectic in style.

The Poulenc piano pieces, *Nocturne* and *Improvisations*, perhaps lack the first fresh charm of the early Poulenc, but they are pleasant enough, which I imagine is all they were meant to be. Poulenc is an excellent pianist, and it is interesting to have the composer's own version of his pieces on wax.

The Mahler fans may be grateful for Ormandy's straightforward reading of the massive *Second Symphony*. Hearing such a work on records is still not the equivalent of an actual performance, particularly in this case, where the "breaks" in the recording come at the least propitious moments, due to the fact that the set was made from a public performance*. Nevertheless—even if only in mosaic form—all Mahler is here, the bombast and sentimentality as well as the apocalyptic voice.

If it is true that string quartets sound better than any other ensemble on records, choral organizations often sound least well. This primary difficulty was fairly well overcome in the Harris choral opus *A Song for Occupations*, but unfortunately it is practically impossible to understand a single word of what is being sung. This makes the recording largely meaningless, since much of the music depends not on a firm melodic line, but on a kind of rhythmic word-declamation without musical interest in itself.

Wagenaar's well-written 'cello *Sonatina* hardly represents him at his best either. Perhaps the phonograph public will find its mellifluous contours appealing; but it would be difficult to recognize a specifically Wagenaar idiom here.

The *Four Songs* by Luening, the *Two Songs* by Donovan, and the latter's *Suite* for piano, constitute only a barely sufficient introduction to their music. This is particularly true in Luening's case, where one side of a record is devoted to four one-minute songs; we might have learned much more about his talents from one song of four minutes' duration. Donovan's *Two Songs* are almost obviously over-complex in texture and this over-complexity is accentuated by the disc. On the other hand his piano *Suite*, excellently played by Mr. Gerschefski, improves on acquaintance. It is at such moments that the phonograph provides the acid test—a piece must "have something" if it will withstand repeated playing.

Aaron Copland

*In this connection the excellently chosen "stopping points" in the *Zarathustra* recording should be mentioned.