

MUSIC OF AND FOR THE RECORDS

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WHAT has mechanical recording done for modern music? And further can a special music be satisfactorily written for records as such?

Records available for player-pianos, organs, or gramophones do not cover the field of modern music with any degree of adequacy. They are turned out by commercial companies with the natural object of financial profit and are therefore to a great extent of cheap, salable music. Since, however, there are some people who enjoy and buy music of a better type a number of "classical" records have also been issued. The purchasers of serious music have been as a whole more interested in who plays than in what is played, so one finds that the recording companies make a great advertising point of the fame of the interpreters. Between the different concerns, almost the entire field of well known performers is covered and until quite recently the artists were allowed to play practically anything, provided it was innocuous and pleasurable. The result was that certain time-honored gumdrops were duplicated innumerable by different artists for different companies while some of the world's greatest music went unrecorded. At first no attempt was made to form a record library of the most important musical works. The situation is gradually changing, and some of the companies are covering the ground of the famous classics. Today by combining the American and European productions one finds a good proportion of the best music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries recorded, although the player-piano rolls are far behind the discs in number.

The recording of modern music has just begun. There is no attempt to cover the field, but when a modern work becomes sufficiently popular to insure a record's paying for itself, it is apt to be found on some of the lists. One feels also that some modern

works have been included by chance because certain performers or organizations insisted on playing them. At present one cannot form a library of the most important modern works but may obtain some of them when they happen to be popular as well as significant. Stravinsky's *Sacre*, for instance, is duplicated several times, but no composition by Schönberg can be obtained anywhere. None of his works have ever been recorded except his early *Verklärte Nacht*, Opus 4, and even this is now out of stock. Often when well-known modern composers are included, only their early and unrepresentative works are found. Certain foreign companies have published a fair number, for instance the Odeon and Polydor Gramophone Companies, and the Pleyel Player Piano Company. American concerns have done little, and the player piano companies practically nothing. Although it is no more costly to record than to print, about a thousand times as many modern works are published.

Far more interesting than a survey of the few fine records of modern music, is a consideration of the possibilities of writing music specially for a recorded form, music which deliberately utilizes some of the advantages gained by removing the personality of performers from the performance.

A handful of modern composers have written for records, mostly for keyboard player rolls. Respighi makes use of a disc of bird-calls in one of his orchestral works. He used this device, however, not because he was interested in composing for the peculiar tone-quality of the record, but probably because he desired authentic bird-calls. Yet there are possibilities in the phonograph record which would be hard to duplicate. It produces new tone qualities which might be used in composition. A record of a violin tone is not exactly the same as the real violin; a new and beautiful tone-quality results. Many variations in tone can be artificially produced by different placements of the microphone in recording. Balance of tone in recording a composition of several complex strands can be obtained only if there is a separate microphone for each of the instruments played together.

Stravinsky and many of his followers have written for player piano rolls music which might be played by hand, but which they desired to divorce from the possibility of misconstruction or

"interpretation" by performers. By using rolls the composer makes sure that the tempo, notes and duration of notes are right. Antheil used several supposedly synchronized pianos in his *Ballet Mécanique* probably for this reason, for the music is nothing that cannot be played by hand. Hindemith, Toch, and others have written for mechanical organ but despite their claims it does not appear that they wrote things impossible to play on an unmechanical organ. Hindemith's *Triadic Ballet* produced at Donaueschingen in 1926 is one of the most elaborate attempts made in this field.

The composer who goes about writing for mechanical instruments in the most penetrating fashion is Nicolai Lopatnikoff. He has experimented in works for all kinds of recordings, such as mechanical orchestras, organs, violins, and pianos. He writes things which can only be performed mechanically, making the mechanism necessary to the composition. He has player piano passages which are impossibly fast, and combinations impractical for the hands of players, no matter how many should take part in a performance. Lopatnikoff also plans to make phonograph records of various factory and street noises, synchronizing and amplifying them as a percussion background for music written for keyboard recordings.

The field of composition for phonograph records and player rolls is wide and offers many prospects, but the workers have been few and too little has been done to try to summarize the results. Those making attempts in this direction are hampered because the majority of music-lovers misunderstand their efforts.

One excellent line of possible development, which so far as I know has not yet been attempted, would be to work with subtle rhythms. To hear a harmony of several different rhythms played together is fascinating, and gives a curious esthetic pleasure unobtainable from any other source. Such rhythms are played by primitives at times, but our musicians find them almost if not entirely impossible to perform well. Why not hear music from player piano rolls on which have been punched holes giving the ratios of rhythms of the most exquisite subtlety?