

Music

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The SOUNDING BOARD

By ALBERT GOLDBERG

In Ghostly Array

The historian of the future is not likely to have as hard a time of it as did the researcher who lived prior to the invention of modern recording devices, both sound and pictorial. Practically every momentous event of current history is now enshrined on film or tape as it happens, and for the nostalgic-minded the record companies have already released such items as Columbia's "I Can Hear It Now" and London's "Prelude to Pearl Harbor," to permit a comfortable fireside reliving of all the crises of nearly the last two decades.

But in the field of music really adequate recording does not extend back far enough to give more than a faint clue to the reality of the performances of great musicians of an earlier period. Singers fared best with early recording devices. Though they are hard to come by, there still exist records of Tamagno, Plancon, Nordica, Lilli Lehmann, Battistini, Bonci and others that offer some hint, however inadequate, of what those singers were like.

Violin Best Suited

Next to the voice the violin was best suited to the old acoustical recording, but since it was impracticable to record anything but short pieces of the encore type, only tidbits remain of the playing of Sarasate, the early Kreisler, Kiubelik and Maude Powell.

Pianists and conductors, of course, fared the worst of all. The piano tone was so elusive that early records offer little guide to the actual quality of the playing, while orchestral recording was in such a primitive state that the interpretations of a Mahler, Safonoff or Nikisch are almost entirely a matter of written or verbal remembrance.

A new source of preserving the pianistic past, at least, has lately come to the fore in recordings of hand-played automatic piano rolls. *Allegro Rec-*

transmitted electrically to a recording machine where they were transcribed upon the paper roll by a delicate inking device. This master record was then processed for use in the reproducing machine.

How Device Worked

Unlike the built-in attachments familiar to the American public of a somewhat later day, the reproducer was a separate unit in itself; it sat in front of the keyboard and by means of felt-covered levers for each key transferred the electrical directions of the roll into playing that was a reasonable, though mechanical, replica of the original.

This device was in use from 1904 to 1911, and during that period the Weltes recorded the playing of practically every outstanding European pianist and composer. After that the phonograph became the accepted means of musical recording and gradually the existence of the earlier medium was completely forgotten by the public.

During World War II the Welte factory in Freiburg, long since converted to other uses, was bombed. But the treasure cache of rolls was saved by carefully wrapping each one and hiding the collection in the barn of a secluded parsonage in the heart of the Black Forest.

Californian Promotes

After the war a Californian, Richard Simonton, learned from a surviving member of the Welte family of the existence of the rolls, which had been removed from their hiding place and found to be in excellent condition. Simonton interested Columbia in the idea of recording them, and then went to Germany in 1948, where he worked at the project with Edwin Welte and Carl Bokisch, the Welte engineer who had made the original recordings nearly half a century before.

ords led the way with two disks devoted to rolls made by Godowsky, Busoni, Pugno, Carreno and Bloomfield-Zeissler, and now Columbia issues an imposing set of five LP disks under the title of "Great Masters of the Keyboard," which enshrines, via rolls, tape and LP, samples of the playing of Paderewski, Busoni, De Pachmann and D'Albert among great pianists, that of Debussy, Ravel, Faure, Saint-Saens, Grieg, Leschetizky, Reger, De Falla, Granados, Scharwenka, Richard Strauss, Mahler and Scriabin among composers, and Nikisch as a conductor also noted for his keyboard skill.

Dramatic Story

A dramatic story lies behind Columbia's unexpected resurrection of these ghosts of the past. At the turn of the century a German firm, the Welte Co., perfected a device for recording on paper rolls the essential elements of tempo, tone levels, phrasing, dynamics and pedaling of a pianist's performance.

The mechanism was complicated but succeeded better than anything else that had yet been invented in reproducing the individual character of a pianist's playing. Each key on the instrument used for recording had a carbon rod attached which made electrical contact with a trough of mercury beneath the keyboard. The resistance of the contact varied with the pressure with which the key was struck, and these varying impulses were

The rolls were played on the one remaining Welte player for which they had been made and re-recorded on tape under extremely difficult conditions. It is this contribution to history which Columbia now releases on the five LP disks of the "Great Masters of the Keyboard" series.

In some instances the playing has the dead quality characteristic of the average player piano, but much of it is astonishingly alive and offers illuminating glimpses of the musical personalities of these departed eminent artists.

Paderewski Best

Taking as a gauge the only pianist of the group with whose playing we were familiar, Paderewski in his Minuet in G, the reproduction of his bell-like tone, the purling, clearly articulated passages and the bouncy rhythm, is lifelike and unmistakable.

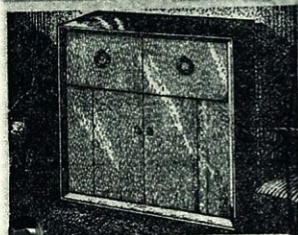
The nine Chopin recordings of De Pachmann are extremely interesting and probably capture the scintillant quality of his playing, though it is hard to imagine so great a reputation based upon such erratic interpretative habits.

As in the case of the earlier Allegro recordings of Busoni, that famous pianist's playing of the Paganini-Liszt "La Campanella," the Chopin "Raindrop" Prelude, and the Beethoven-Liszt Fantasia on "The Ruins of Athens" only leaves a large question mark. The technical facility is enormous though not overpowering by contemporary standards, but musically it all sounds angular and unattractive.

Other Musicians

Eugen D'Albert playing a couple of his own not very striking compositions gives the impression of a Horowitz type of virtuosity. Leschetizky, teacher of Paderewski and other great pianists, exhibits a highly graceful style in several of his own salon pieces.

Debussy, in five of his Preludes and the "Children's Corner" suite, lives up to his reputation as the best interpreter of his own music; one seldom hears



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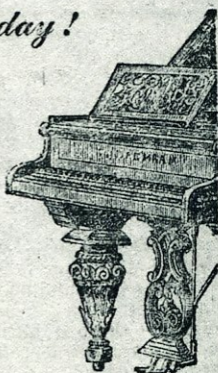
Opera Workshop to Present Farce

The Los Angeles City College Opera Workshop will present two performances of Jacques Ibert's musical farce, "Angeli-que," in City College Auditorium this Saturday, and Monday, April 17 at 8:15 p.m. Adolph Heller will direct the music, and Glynn Ross the stage.

There will be two alternating casts with Bonnie Murray and Estelle Marlov singing the title role. The opera will be preceded by Rietti's Concerto for five wind instruments and orchestra, and Couperin's "Concert dans le gout theatrical," arranged by Cortot.

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