

HISTORISCHE AUFNAHMEN

by

Leslie Gerber

With a little luck all around, this will develop into a regular column surveying important historical reissues in all fields of sound recording. However, since I am still putting together some of the guidelines for coverage and looking for reviewers--and, frankly, since the deadline caught me by surprise--I thought I'd have some fun by boring you with your own problems.

Collectors and archivists are constantly complaining about the lack of historical reissues in all fields of recording; it has long been a favorite sport. Yet the volume of material produced is staggering. Probably no one person can keep up with the products of the opera underground alone; my own shelf devoted to blues reissues filled up long ago, yet I can't begin to keep up with what is issued; comparative listings and recommendations of the available collections of acoustically recorded operatic excerpts would be a task requiring years, with half the time spent determining what is available and where; and the list goes on for quite a while.

How can it be that we starve in the midst of such apparent splendor? Nearly everyone reading these pages is likely to have a lengthy list of such complaints--and I would like to see them!--but here are a few of my own:

1. Reissuing is still considered a somewhat grubby business. There are small labels producing semi-authorized or totally unauthorized reissues of important material in nearly every field of sound, but their distribution and publicity usually range from spotty to terrible. As a producer of classical music reissues by major artists, I have been unable to get

review space in one of the two major journals in the U.S. supposedly devoting themselves to important new releases. (I don't suppose I even need to mention the problems in achieving wholesale distribution!) I am very fond of the blues reissues produced by the small Yazoo label, which have some of the best engineering of any 78 transfers I've ever heard along with a generally excellent selection of material. Yet I cannot recall seeing a single review of any of their titles in any mass-circulation magazine. In short, who cares but us? I wouldn't like to try to answer the question.

2. There is, of course, no coordination between reissuers. Lauritz Melchior collectors were recently faced with the need to buy two competing new issues in order to obtain three short selections along with duplicates of the rest of the contents. I'll bet you can find five hundred 78 sides included on more than one of the mono vocal collections listed in Schwann 2 (or should that be a thousand?).

3. Quality remains a chancy thing at best. Some labels can always be depended on to do bad work; others are so uneven it drives one crazy. What is one to say of EMI, which produced its long-overdue LP of Stravinsky's piano playing (Seraphim 60183) with such heavily-filtered, dull sound that the recordings were rendered almost unlistenable? (The original French LP pressing was no better.) EMI also did us the marvelous favor of reissuing three LPs of Alexander Kipnis's wonderful recordings--taking many of them from fibred commercial pressings with a stupefying amount of surface noise. And yet the same company has done excellent transfers from time to time. As if the problems of obtaining good originals to work with and transferring with correct equalization were not enough, there is always the danger (especially with very early recordings) that the originals are not recorded at exactly 78 or 80 rpm. The wretchedly off-speed transfers one sometimes hears distort the intent of the performers even more than filtered sound or bad surface noise.

4. Occasionally we get a really remarkable piece of good planning. This must certainly be said for Columbia's recent Bessie Smith series: all her Columbia recordings, well re-engineered, presented with complete discographic information and perceptive liner notes, and attractively packaged to boot! Victrola is said to be planning complete issues of Caruso and Rachmaninoff; and I must certainly put in a word for my friend Steve Smolian's complete Mattia Battistini series (Perennial Records), of which three volumes (out of eight) have already been issued. There are other projects, however, which point out forcefully the totally chaotic nature of most reissuing. Look at the most recent group of Odyssey vocal reissues: the most senseless programming imaginable, and an almost complete lack of discographic data (a few dates were thrown in haphazardly). Must we still fight for such things? Obviously; and the battle goes poorly.

5. Records are meant to be played, not just looked at. You would think the producers of LP collections might give a thought to their programming, so that one could sit down and listen through at least one LP side without being driven to distraction by jarring changes of sound quality, material, etc. Often they don't. Also, records are bought by record collectors, and this is especially true of historical reissues (as it may not be of Top 100 LPs). One would think that anyone willing to lay out the price of three LPs of Lilli Lehmann would want to hear everything she recorded; yet the producers of the recent series (Rococo) eliminated all alternate takes (even those from completely different periods) and crammed the remainder onto five sides, leaving the sixth blank. Was anyone there thinking about collectors (or about anything)?

6. WHO HAS THE TIME TO KEEP UP WITH ALL THESE RECORDS? Not me, that's for damn sure! and I make my living in the reissue business!

Starting with 1973, this column will attempt to note all historical LPs published, with some brief word about their significance and quality if possible. The attempt is certain to be incomplete (as indeed it probably would were I to devote full time to the job). Therefore, I most fervently solicit your assistance in informing me of important issues in any field of interest. I can read Schwann's New Releases as well as anyone else (although even there if you think something is particularly important it would not hurt to point it out), but it is non-Schwann and particularly non-U.S. material I expect to have the most trouble with. Listings of such material, especially if accompanied by ordering information, will be most gratefully received. And anyone willing to review briefly the output in any field, or to do retrospectives of material already available, is very cordially invited to write to: Leslie Gerber, Parnassus Records, P.O. Box 281, Phoenicia, N.Y. 12464.

I have been thinking, almost seriously, that ARSC should sponsor a "Grand Prix du Disque Ancien," and I've been trying to think of nominees from the 1972 output. One would certainly be Columbia's above-mentioned Bessie Smith series. Another would be Columbia's The Art of Joseph Szigeti (M6X 31513). Normally I am not fond of such large collections of miscellaneous material, but producer Thomas Frost has certainly done well for collectors with his selection of material. There is not one dud on the twelve sides--although I might have made other choices here or there. I also think that the second sides of of the records holding the Beethoven and Brahms concertos could well have held fillers instead of only 18:51 and 16:07 of music. However, it is hard to complain when the sound transfers (mostly from ordinary commercial pressings) have been so beautifully done. Steve Smolian points out to me Preiser's set Von der Hofoper zur Staatsoper (LV 500), consisting of five very full LPs of excellently chosen vocal singles, well-transferred and intelligently programmed--the latter being, as I've mentioned, a particular rarity. Anyway, here are three nominations for the mythical prize. What are yours?