

HOME SERVICE: SUNDAY DECEMBER 30th 1945

12.15-12.50pm

1945

Desmond Shawe-Taylor reviews outstanding records of the year.

When I was thinking over the year's records, and wondering how to squeeze the pick of them into half an hour, a rather curious fact occurred to me. Gramophone records are almost the only commodity I can think of which has actually improved in quality during the war. Of course, triple purchase tax makes them horribly expensive; but then most things, such as books and furniture and drink, have got both dearer and nastier since 1939; whereas recording has really improved (particularly in this country), and even the surfaces, which got a bit rough in the early years of the war, are now quite satisfactory again. So on the whole things might be worse for the gramophone fan.

1945 has been a year of great enterprise; and much of it has gone into the production of those big, handsome complete sets published by His Master's Voice. And very often supported by the British Council. There is the Elgar Second Symphony, The Dream of Gerontius, and Holst's "Planets": all these were admirable sets, and the Planets caused quite a sensation by its recording. This month the series has been continued with Purcell's "Dido and Aeneas", which strikes me, I confess, as considerably below par both in performance and in recording. And then there was that wonderful Rome version of the Verdi Requiem, which came out in Italy just before the war, and was such an eye-opener to us all in its dramatic fervour, its sumptuous solo singing, and its Mediterranean warmth.

Side by side with these large HMV issues, the Decca Company have been steadily building up their classical repertoire by a series of standard orchestral works recorded by their new and greatly improved process, in the Kingsway Hall. There was a particularly good Beethoven Fifth Symphony and a very brilliant Tchaikovsky Nutcracker Suite. The best of the larger Columbia contributions was a lovely Mozart Clarinet Quintet. But this morning I want to concentrate on the smaller things which tend to get over-shadowed: particularly on the single records. After all, you have to be a rich man to afford more than one or two of these complete sets in a year; and many people may have been given ten shillings or a pound for Christmas and be wishing they could think of the right record or pair of records to get with it.

Well, in the whole year I don't think anything more absolutely beautiful has come out than that Mozart Horn Quintet played on two Deccas by Denis Brain and members of the Griller Quartet.

RECORD: [Part of side 1](#)

[Set: Decca K 1138/9. This track: K 1138, matrix AR8742-2]

That was the Mozart Horn Quintet on Decca K.1138 and 1139. And here's a sample of Decca's latest orchestra recording which shows the great improvement in the range of tone which can now be got on to the wax.

RECORD: [Part of The Dance of the Hours](#)

[Decca K 1119, mat. AR8863-2, 0' 0" – 2' 57"]

I doubt if many people need telling that that is Ponchelli's "Dance of the Hours". It's on Decca K.1119.

Now here's another single record for those who like something odd the beaten track: an Adagio for Strings by the young American composer Samuel Barber, played by the NBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Toscanini. Barber is a composer whose style has a charming, serious simplicity of its own, and I believe that many people could feel much attracted by this piece of his if they were to hear it often.

RECORD: [Barber: Adagio for Strings beg. side 1](#)

[HMV DB 6180, mat. 2A 073221]

That was the beginning of Barber's Adagio for Strings on HMV DB.6180.

Now let's have some vocal records. I'm very fond of the voice myself, but I often feel that the great days of vocal recording are over, and most of the best vocal records seem to have been removed from the catalogue. Still, this year two of our pre-war gramophone favourites have made a most welcome re-appearance. One of them is Elisabeth Schumann, who has made a most delightful record of two of Haydn's little-known English songs. One side is devoted to a lovely setting of Shakespeare's "She Never Told Her Love"; but as I played that when reviewing the record a few months ago, this time I'd like to put on the first verse of the other side – that rollicking sailor's song into which our prima donna throws herself with such surprising gusto:

High on the giddy bending mast
The seaman furls the rending sail,
And, fearless of the rushing blast,
He careless whistles to the gale.
Rattling ropes and rolling seas,
Hurly burly, hurly burly,
War nor death can him displease.

RECORD: [The Sailor's Song](#)

[HMV DA 1850, mat. 0EA10581-1]

That was Elisabeth Schumann singing Haydn on HMV DA.1850.

The second old favourite whom we're glad to see back in the lists is the Swedish tenor Jussi Bjorling. Together with a Swedish soprano named Schymberg he made a good

record of the love duets from *la Boheme* and *Rigoletto* (that was on HMV DB.6119); and here he is singing the big aria from Puccini's *Turandot* in the real Covent Garden manner.

RECORD: [Nessun Dorma](#)

[HMV DA 1841, mat. 0SB2399-2]

That record of Jussi Bjorling in *Turandot* was on HMV DA.1341. As though to console his enormous public for the death of John McCormack, a record has just been issued which must have been made a good many years ago, and shows his voice almost at its best. On one side it has a Dunhill setting of Yeats, and on the other Bantock's "Song to the Seals".

RECORD: [Song to the Seals](#)

[HMV DA 1851, mat. 0EA2126-1]

That was McCormack singing the "Song to the Seals" on HMV DA 1851. And here's one more vocal record which will arouse memories among elder listeners. Mendelssohn's duets may be Victorian, but they're still very pretty when they're as well sung and played as this. The singers are Isobel Baillie and Kathleen Ferrier, and the pianist is Gerald Moore. As for the title – surely you'll remember it?

RECORD: [I would that my love](#)

[Columbia DB 2194, mat. CA19863-1]

Yes, that was Mendelssohn's "I Would that My Love" on Columbia DB.2194.

Meanwhile the pianists are waiting their turn. Remember I'm still trying to confine myself to single records and pairs of records; but I must mention, in passing, that first-class recording by Solomon and the B.B.C. Symphony Orchestra of Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto. Here's a short passage of the first movement, to remind you of its excellence.

RECORD: [1st movement](#)

[Set: HMV DB 6196/9. This track joins: DB 6196, mat. 2EA10265-1; DB 6196, mat. 2EA10266-1; DB 6197, mat. 2EA10267-2; and DB 6197, mat. 2EA10268-1]

That recording of Solomon in the Third Beethoven Concerto is on HMV DB.6196 to 6199. During the year Solomon made several other capital records, including what seems to me the best gramophone version of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* on HMV C.3455 and 3456.

Another pianist who deserves our gratitude this year is Kathleen Long. For one thing, she is the only person who has taken any notice of the Fauré centenary; and I strongly recommend to anyone who feels like buying a short, unfamiliar piece for piano and orchestra Fauré's lovely *Ballade*. If you like the César Franck *Variations Symphoniques*, you're almost certain to enjoy this piece too.

RECORD: [Fauré Ballade](#)

[Set: Decca K 1130/1. This track: K 1131, mat. R8857-2]

The Fauré Ballade is played by Kathleen Long and the Boyd Neel Orchestra on two Decca records – numbers K.1130 and 1131. There are also two single 10 inch Deccas on which Miss Long has done Fauré's Nocturne in D flat and his Barcarolle. And I like her cool, easy playing of two Scarlatti Sonatas on another ten-inch Decca.

RECORD: [Scarlatti Sonata](#)

[Decca M 566, mat. DR7311-3: Sonata in c minor]

That was Kathleen Long playing a Scarlatti Sonata on Decca M.566.

I've said some rather rude things about American recording during the year, so I'm particularly glad to praise whole-heartedly two pairs of American orchestra records. One is the two little-known Debussy Images played by the San Francisco Orchestra under Pierre Monteux: Gígues and Rondes de Printemps – real connoisseurs' records which you will suddenly find deleted if you don't snap them up quick: they're on HMV DB.6182 and 6183. The other is a new version of that much-recorded work, Ravel's Daphnis and Chloe Suite No.2. I must say, when I heard this record I was simply bowled over, both by the recording and by the tremendously brilliant and exhilarating performance of the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Koussevitsky. The solo flute has one unfortunate moment on side 2: but generally speaking there's no orchestral playing within miles of this standard to be heard in this country.

RECORD: [Side 3 almost to end](#)

[Ser: HMV DB 6240/1. This track: DB 6240, mat. D4RC636]

I mustn't forget to mention another famous musician who has returned to records in 1945 – Sir Thomas Beecham. The first of his new series with the LPO weren't quite up to the old standard, either in performance or recording; but in the Royal Hunt and Storm from Berlioz's Trojans he and the orchestra are in terrific form – and what a glorious piece of music it is.

RECORD: [Royal Hunt and Storm Music](#)

[HMV DB 6241, mat. 2EA9042-3]

That was Sir Thomas Beecham conducting the LPO in Berlioz's Royal Hunt and Storm on HMV DB.6241.

So far, I'm afraid this has been, inevitably, more of a catalogue than a review, and I'm only too conscious of the many notable records I haven't mentioned, but I'm determined to leave myself enough time to deal rather more fully with a new issue which seems to me particularly important. The name of Benjamin Britten is becoming more and more familiar to the public, especially since the great success of his opera "Peter Grimes",

which is being taken up by opera houses all over the world. Now Decca have issued on three records his Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings, which is his most purely beautiful work so far, and makes – in my opinion – an ideal introduction to his music. Indeed many people who are scared of the idea of all modern music might get an agreeable surprise if they would give these records a try. The performers are the two soloists for whom it was written, Peter Pears, tenor, and Dennis Brain, horn, with the Boyd Neel String Orchestra conducted by the composer. The Serenade consists of a succession of six English poems, and it begins and ends with an unaccompanied horn call. Let me play you one of the six: I'll choose the song whose words will be most familiar – Tennyson's lines "The Splendour Falls on Castle Walls", with its famous refrain:

Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,
Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying.

If anyone thinks of Tennyson's poem as a faded old anthology piece – well, just listen to Britten's music, as rich and romantic and golden as a landscape of Turner.

RECORD: [Last part of side 2](#)

[Set: Decca AK 1151/3. This track: AK 1152, mat. AR8462-3]

Of course, there isn't time to comment on all six of these poems from Britten's Serenade, but I think we can just play one more – this time an extremely rapid and brilliant duet for horn and voice, rather in the style of a scherzo. The words here are Ben Jonson's Hymn to Diana, the Goddess of the Moon; and each verse ends with the tenor exuberantly scampering up and down the scale to the words: "Goddess excellently bright".

RECORD: [Beginning of side 5](#)

[Decca AK 1152, mat. AR8465-4]

Well, after those two excerpts, I needn't say much about the excellence of the performance of Britten's Serenade on these three Decca records – K.1151 to 1153. It's difficult to imagine the work better sung or played. What about the recording? I wish Decca would use a rather more resonant studio for their small-scale recording work: there's something a little bit dead about the effect here and there in these records. Also I feel they allow their engineers too big a say in questions of volume and attack: engineers always like music to be as much on a dead level as possible, they always want to take the bite and sting out of the music; and there are certainly one or two climaxes in this set where I feel their over-tactful hands on the control panel. But on the whole, it's a very satisfactory piece of work; and the gramophone public will be lucky if 1946 brings them anything so new and so thrilling as this Britten Serenade.

(Closing announcement to trail normal Record Review by Desmond Shawe-Taylor on Sunday January 20th at 12.15 p.m. in the H[ome] S[ervice].)

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