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WINTER MISCELLANY

Piano Music of Chopin, Vols. 1, 2, 3.
Wilhelm Kempff.

London CS 6040,-41,-42 (stereo)

This is unexpectedly great and profoundly pleasing Chopin from an absolutely top-notch German pianist. Unexpected to me, at least, because Kempff though a tremendous player of such as Beethoven (in a major series for Decca) seemed to me always a bit on the severe side. His Beethoven was extraordinary in every detail and in the grandeur of its conception, but he did not allow himself any "unbuttoning" of the sort that even such a big pianist as his colleague Wilhelm Backhaus can easily produce.

Yet in Chopin, Wilhelm Kempff is all grace, fluency, lyricism, with the most gorgeously luscious tones, a wholly open and expressive manner—and a shaping of nuance and phrase that is as fine as that in his Beethoven. You'll love it, as the ads say, and you'll like it whether you are a connoisseur or just a listener who loves good Chopin.

Ah—the big question: *why stereo?* One answer, of course, is that all Londons are stereo these days and a "mono" Chopin would be unthinkable. But that's no reason for us to feel like paying an extra buck per disc! So again—why? Does it add anything?

Well, not much at first, but definitely a lot more than you might expect, in the long listen. The stereo version is worth the cash, given—and this is important—a thoroughly adequate stereo system, with minimum problems in the way of hum and rumble. (Recorded level on stereo piano is necessarily low yet proper piano volume is quite high, the two combining to exaggerate hum and rumble.)

An AB-style stereo-mono listening test on these shows that stereo does add color and life to the sound of a solo piano, even without much positive right-and-left separation—of the piano itself. The space around the piano is what counts and stereo, making that space more real, makes the piano within it seem more natural and immediate. In fact, I seem to hear, or almost to feel, the length of the piano itself, the sounding instrument. Monophonically, it shrinks to a smaller scope; its sound shrinks somehow with it.

That's what stereo can do for the single sound source.

Incidentally, let me say that if your stereo is rightly phased and your speakers well placed in a good position you'll have no trouble with doubling of the piano image—a piano in each speaker. They should fuse completely. I happen to be sitting as I write with my back only a few feet in front of the two stereo speakers, one to each side of me (I am facing away from the sound source merely because I get a good light on my typewriter) and I hear no sense of duality or split. There is just one, big piano somewhere vaguely in the space behind me.

Of course, good stereo miking plays a part here. There are a good many ill-advised piano

stereos where the mikes are so grotesquely situated that you seem to hear the keyboard stretched out about ten feet with the pianist racing back and forth from side to side of your room! But this isn't stereo. At a sensible distance, two mikes will converge the piano in the proper middle position, between speakers, and will simultaneously pick up the room bounce, the echo reflections, to place the piano aurally in space. That's what London has done.

Schubert: Symphony in C ("The Great").
(A) Bavarian Radio Symphony Orch.,
Jochum.

Decca DL 79993 (stereo)

(B) Cento Soli Orch. of Paris, Argenta.

Omega OSL-12 (stereo)

(C) London Symphony, Krips.

London CS 6061 (stereo)

A glance at these duplications gives you an idea of the problems of record reviewing in stereo these days. London, last December, sent me well over fifty separate stereo discs for trial, of which (C), above, was merely one; but even that single disc had two rivals—and I am simply not able to play and absorb intelligently this huge and meaningful symphony more than, say, twice in a given day or week.

I got through the first two with my senses and intelligence intact, but London, the third to come along, was the last straw; the symphony now is coming out my ears and I am no longer honestly sure as to what is what about each version! Give me six months for contemplation and I'll write you a really informative comparison of all three.

Some judgment is surely better than none, so I suggest that as I hear them now the Decca version with the excellent Eugen Jochum is musically the most telling of these three, best in style and spirit, best especially in respect to many a lovely detail of phrasing and rhythm, best, all in all, in its projection of the dramatic moments of the work. London's with Krips comes very close behind, surely as fine in some parts, notably the slow movement. The Argenta version is noticeably less interesting, partly, I suspect, due to the all-French orchestra (oh, what a sad, wobbly, French French horn at the beginning, so unlike the German horn!)—but partly due also to inexperience in this sort of music by the young conductor. I don't go along in this case with the extravagant praise heaped up on Argenta (who died suddenly) by Omega's copy writers.

The Decca-Jochum version has excellent conservative stereo, a bit low in level and not exactly overpowering in the bass, but really fine for the music, even so. The London version is brighter, with sharper treble and heavier bass and a larger liveness; but it, too, is conservative in stereo with no very pronounced separation and mainly a heightened sense of room space to credit to the stereo aspect. The Omega-Argenta disc is somewhat like other Omegas of this series, rather sharply separated and fairly close-up, for an interesting if slightly forced effect.

Grieg: Piano Concerto. Rachmaninoff: Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini.
Philippe Entremont; Phila. Orch., Ormandy.

Columbia MS 6016 (stereo)

Boy, is Columbia's stereo getting slick nowadays! This has the suavest, most polished, massive, stacey stereo sound you can imagine: the piano is perfectly huge and auditorium-filling, the orchestra smoothly and vastly spread out around it.

Entremont is one of the new youthful prodigies of the more Romantic sort—he is in a loose competitive league with such as Cliburn and Glen Gould. He's good, this one, with all the power you could want yet a smooth, polished tone without the banging hardness of the last crop of virtuosos that came along after the war. Still, like the others in this group, Entremont will have to go on from these fine war horse works to a variety of other things—or risk stultification via endless repeats of the same music. That's the big danger for all new pianists, today. The bigger they are, the more restricted is their repertory. Until, that is, they get big enough to tell the bosses what they want to play—or else.

The familiar Grieg ripples along here in a thoroughly professional manner, nothing remarkable but, on the other hand, suffering from no noticeable boredom or falseness of feeling—which is saying a lot for a performance of this over-played piece. The Rachmaninoff, one of his very best works and the only well known one with a feeling of real modernity in it, is quite beautifully played, I'd say. The music is full of a sort of scary, witch-like electrical quality, emphasized by the quoting of the ominous *Dies Irae* melody, so often used in such music. (Cf. Berlioz' Fantastic Symphony.) The electricity is definitely in Entremont's concept, though at a lower voltage than in Rachmaninoff's own performance, as of years ago. The stuff is enjoyable in stereo.

Copland: Billy the Kid (1938); Rodeo (1942). Morton Gould & His Orchestra.

RCA Victor LM 2195 (mono)

A good record, this one! Here are the two Copland ballets that first launched the vogue for Western material in ballet form—they've since been followed by innumerable examples in ballet, in films, musical comedies, TV shows. Just as it took a German, Handel, to show the British how to write British oratorio, so it took the boy from Brooklyn, no cowboy himself, to write the first effective Western music for our own ballet stage.

The thing about Copland is that his stuff is strictly high-level, but it is strictly entertaining and strictly Western, without compromise. No highbrow effects here. There's a bar-room piano with thump tucks in its hammers to make it tinny enough, there's a low-down hoe-down and an old-style square dance—the titles of the parts run from Buckaroo Holiday to Corral Nocturne. But even so, the music is on a symphonic plane

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