

one of the favorite 18th century works. Both versions represent about the best playing of this sort of music available from their respective arenas—Germany and the Adriatic Sea. Both are excellent stereotypes, technically and for the music itself. Both are "authentic" in their approach and in their complement of performers, a small string group with harpsichord plus two or three solo violins.

There have been horribly distorted performances of this music, and not infrequently either—a recording by the late Guido Cantelli comes to my mind as perhaps the most distressing of all. There have been stodgy, musical-style playings, romantic, overblown versions. Our own symphony orchestras are inherently incapable of making sense of this kind of music—though they have tried. But here, at last, we have it as right as Mozart, and the variations from one to the other of these two recordings are what may be called, at last, legitimate within the style and period of the music.

Vanguard's recording is the lightest, the airiest, the most electrical. It has a cat-like quality—steel-sprunged, but beautifully under control, that is of the best in the Italian school of present-day string playing. (Zagreb is evidently more Italian than Germanic in its musical affiliations.) The soloists are sensationally good in their parts (one is a principal solo, the others more or less secondary.) The display of the successive seasons lulls, crackles, roars, bristles, sleeps, all within the strict 18th-century framework of musical expression.

London's from Stuttgart, within the same general tradition, is sweet and German. The tempi are slower, the music fuller, softer, rounder, the voltage generally lower but the amperage plenty ample. German Baroque playing (this is nominally what is called Baroque music) can be stuffy, heavy, plodding; it isn't, here—far from it. If you play this hard on the heels of the Vanguard disc it will seem a bit heavy-handed for about three minutes. Then, as you adjust to the feel of the performance, the heaviness will vanish.

An interesting stereo point, concerning both

discs: these are of the 18th-century concerto type where the solo or solo group is contrasted and complementary to the larger "tutti" body of strings but not singled out in the later super-virtuoso fashion. The engineers accordingly have been able to place these solo fiddles in a much truer and more natural perspective than is possible when the concerto soloist is a big name with all the trimmings and plenty to show off about. Big-name solos must sound big—and they do, alas.

Most of the big concertos are now subject to stereo elephantiasis of the solo. I don't like it and doubt if I ever will—for it is not a necessity in stereo, as it was in mono recording. I hate to hear huge fiddles playing close-up in front of vast, distant orchestras; I dislike a ponderous piano that floats in mid-air before your very nose, I find more and more that stereo solos—all solos—are best when taken from a more concert-like position and in a concert-style volume balance. But, unfortunately, the practice of solo magnification isn't going to die easily.

And so there's nothing like the "little" solo, the semi-soloist, for good stereo! If his name is anonymous, or set, figuratively, in medium-sized letters, not big ones then he gets ideal stereo treatment from our present-day engineers. Try either of these recordings and you'll see exactly what I mean.

Berlioz: Symphonie Fantastique. Cento Soli Orch. of Paris, Fourestier.

Omega Disk OSL 9 (stereo)

Stravinsky: Petrouchka. Cento Soli Orch., Albert.

Omega Disk OSL 8 (stereo)

Here is an unexpected and quite startling new stereo series, in two examples, launched out of the blue by a company that hasn't to my knowledge had its nose in the classical disc catalogue before. The discs are, surprisingly, top rate. The sound is terrific and so is the engineering; the performances, by an orchestra that I hadn't heard mentioned before, are fresh, full of life, if (like many a

French performance) somewhat on the erratic side.

The best of the two sonically is the Stravinsky—mainly thanks to Stravinsky himself, who is beautifully served by this opulent, full-bodied two-channel (?) stereo taping. One of the interesting things our ears begin to learn in respect to stereo these days is the quite different effect of two-channel and three-channel originals. Not all are clearly to be heard one way or the other—but a recording such as this one seems clearly two-sided, the emphasis on the right and left areas, with a relatively mild sense of straight-ahead middle. I do not by this mean that there is a "hole in the middle" by any means! (Now that my speaker phasing is usually right, I don't believe in holes in the middle any more. They really don't exist.) There is simply a feeling of "two-ness" here, an attraction for the ear towards both sides, which spread out beautifully to overlap in the middle and so complete the picture. This is superb for the Stravinsky score, which never got such a fabulously clinical inside exposition. The endless details of orchestration are so clearly, startlingly brought out that you will be fascinated for hours, given a bit of musical curiosity.

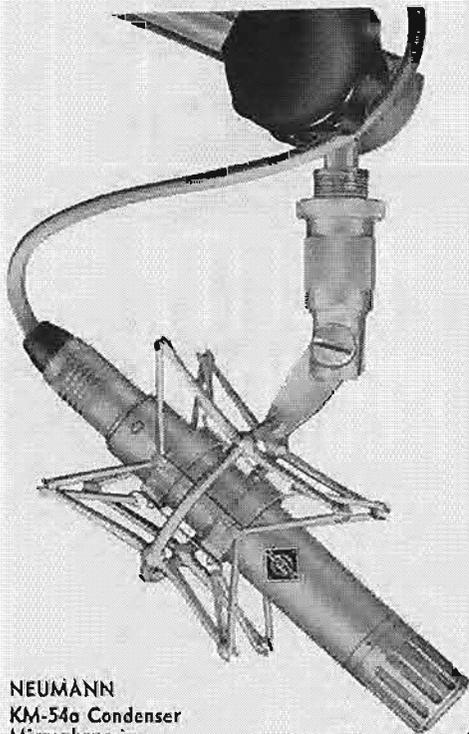
The famous Berlioz symphony, a bit less striking as stereo, is the better performance—it is a traditional favorite of French musicians, who put into it all the accuracy, the electrical quality, that it must have. (The Stravinsky performance is conducted by a young German conductor; he makes it sound German, with unusually slow tempo, a rather heavy quality. Interesting, even so.)

My congrats to Omega for a splendid technical job on both discs.

Berlioz: Corsair, Beatrice and Benedict, King Lear, Rob Roy Overtures. Philharmonic Promenade Orch., Bouli.

Westminster WST 14009 (stereo)

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