

Record Review

EDWARD TATNALL CANBY*

VOICES

Stephen Foster Song Book. Robert Shaw Chorale. (Includes "Play-It-Yourself" booklet.)

RCA Victor LSC 2295 stereo

RCA's heady extravaganzas continue and this one turns out to be a beauty, though the "Do-It-Yourself" aspect is pretty feeble as a gimmick. It's the record that counts and anything extra you have to pay is well worth it.

Sure, everybody knows Stephen Foster. But what comes through clearly in these Foster arrangements is Foster's by-now almost classical purity of melody. The man was certainly a first-rate musician and a marvelous composer of fine tunes, perhaps in the Schubert class—if Schubert had been born in 19th century America, or Foster in Vienna. It is clear, I'd say, that an accident of circumstance led Foster to compose only that which his background experience and training made possible—and into these songs, so limited in outward scope, he put what it takes to be a really fine musician.

What Robert Shaw and his colleagues have done here is to treat Foster melodies with a classic restraint, relying on the simplest of harmonies in line with those that Foster would himself have understood, avoiding the modern tendency to dress up the straightforward tunes with fancy barber shop or jazzy (rag-time) coloration. I don't mean that these Shaw settings are dry—they're as schmaltzy as you could wish and some of them get pretty complicated, too. But the sentiment is strictly in line with the style of the melody—diatonic (scale-wise) harmonies for diatonic tunes; the somewhat highbrow sound of the whole actually serves to bring out the simple beauty of the Foster songs on their own—where more zippy arrangements merely make them sound old-fashioned.

Most of this is choral singing, with assorted solo voices intermingled; parts are male-voice, as seems appropriate; the faster items—"Doodah!" and the like—are touched up with a bit of banjo, just enough to keep things in perspective. Words are words and Foster is Foster; if you don't like my description, try the record and judge for yourself. You'll be bound to enjoy it unless you're a musical aristocrat or something.

As for the Gimmick, a pretty booklet with arrangements of the same songs (for piano and voice) by Skitch Henderson, it's good looking, decorative, but otherwise very poor—second-best Foster. The sketchy arrangements (no pun intended) altogether lack the style of the recorded settings and, silly idea, only the first verse of each song is printed! How'n heck are you to do it yourself if you don't have the other verses?

Gospel Songs. The Grace Gospel Singers, piano organ, tambourin, traps.

Rondo-lette SA 115 stereo

Not so bad. The seven young negro girls (I'm looking at their picture) have collective pretensions to higher things—they've had Training, or some of them have, and they look like a good bet for TV or Broadway or something; but Mother Nature and good old Religion win out here; though there are some fancy high notes, some styled-up endings, mostly the girls just can't help lettin' go. And what a sound! Mostly, their voices are ex-

tremely high, adolescent sounding, and together with a bangy piano, some high-power percussion and a rumbly, juicy organ, they can get superb effects. Try last band, side 1.

Voices from the Vienna Woods. Boys Choir of Vienna.

Omega OSL 28 stereo

This has been hanging around for months—haven't had a chance to mention it, but I've enjoyed the sweet, sentimental, typically Viennese boys' singing a good many times. The music is mostly traceable back to Beethoven, Strauss, Schubert, Haydn, Mozart—but never forget that in Austria you need merely mention one of these gentry and tears well up in the eyes of the lowliest peasant. Beethoven and Schubert aren't highbrow, over there, you see. Thus—the Big Names on this record ooze out in the corniest style you could ask for—Austrian corn, of course—and there isn't so much as a trace of long hair and high brow to be heard.

Jus' lovely, and beautiful in stereo, too. Try it on your own tear glands.

Gilbert and Sullivan: The Pirates of Penzance. D'Oyly Carte Opera Co. New Symphony Orch, Godfrey.

London OSA 1202 (2) stereo

Here's another continuing series and I note this recording as one of many—probably all of the G & S operas, sooner or later. Note, too, that there is a parallel series from England being issued on Angel, by the Glyndebourne Opera company; take my respectful word for it that London's original D'Oyly Carte group is far, far ahead in the game, as it has been for so long. They have the tradition, the style, the attitude, the type of voice, that makes G & S living satire rather than half-dead Victorianism. Nobody else has it quite so good.

This one is particularly nice in stereo, what with the various "outdoor" scenes where pirates, policemen and assorted ladies are prowling around hunting each other. Wonderful effects. I liked particularly the monologue "asides" of the male chorists, in the midst of all this. Very imaginative use of the stereo recording medium—English Decca (London) has a good edge on everybody else in this respect, I'd say. (Or had when this album was made.) Keep your eye peeled and your purse propped open for any and all future D'Oyly Carte stereo.

Voices of African Birds. Recorded and Narrated by Myles E. W. North.

Cornell Univ. Records
(12½ Roberts Pl., Ithaca, N. Y.)

This adds a new slant to the notable Cornell series of bird song records; the birds are from a strange continent, to begin with, and the narrator is no longer the familiar, slow-paced Dr. A. A. Allen, whose dry, sentimental bits of wisdom and fact have given continuity to most of the earlier Cornell offerings. He starts this one off, but bows out in favor of the man from Africa, who sounds just like his name. Very British, with a strange outlander touch.

Once you get used to the Senior District Commissioner's voice—he is Commissioner for all of Kenya—and his somewhat discursive background accounts, you'll find the bird sounds fascinating. Even an ordinary tyro like me can tell in a moment that these are no yankee bird calls. As always, a lot of the

little birds will sound pretty much alike to the beginner, but there are always the big ones and the odd-ball fowl to keep you interested. Good stuff and unique.

Moussorgsky Méloides—enregistrement intégrale. Boris Christoff, assorted pfs., orch.

Angel 3575 D/LX (4)

For lovers of Russian music this is an interesting specialty. As indicated by the album title, it comes from France, where a good many of the recordings evidently were made. These are all the loose Moussorgsky songs, including a few with orchestra—they constitute a pretty big dose for one-time listening and so you will want this album as a long-range pleasure, to be absorbed a bit at a time.

Christoff is good—no two ways about it. He has the right sort of big, mobile basso-haritone voice to put Russian style into Moussorgsky; he knows the tradition to a T and is thoroughly at home in a medium that is all style—the songs are impossible to sing for voices trained up in a different tradition. He acts, as he sings—he bellows, grunts, heaves, sighs, groans—and this is utterly right. He hits perfectly that garish, deep-Romantic nightmare quality that is the most dramatic aspect of late-19th century Russian music and in particular of Moussorgsky himself.

Best of all, Christoff has an excellent ear and grasps every nuance of Moussorgsky's often tricky harmony and tortured melody. Because of this, he is able to project the grunts and the groans, the half-spoken passages, without ever losing the thread of musical line. Lesser singers make hash of it all too often.

One oddity—the famous series of Nursery songs, sung in the first person by a little boy mostly to his nurse, are done by Christoff entirely in a thin, nasal semi-falsetto. Sounds a bit silly at first, but very possibly this is the proper Russian tradition, at least for a male voice. I found it a bit hard to take and, personally, I find Jennie Tourel's soprano-voice approach more effective as music. But what is a huge basso to do when he's supposed to act the part of a five-year-old? Mighty precocious little lad it would be, who could sing in Christoff's natural basso!

Purcell: Welcome to all the Pleasures (Ode on St. Cecilia's Day, 1683). Blow: Ode of the Death of Henry Purcell (1695). Alfred Deller, John Whitworth, April Cantelo et al., Kalmar Orch. of London.

Vanguard BGS 3015 stereo

There is probably no music more immediately strange to the average modern ear than that of Purcell, out of the 17th century; and no type of voice is more startling, too, than the male alto or countertenor—of which there are two in this recording. But Purcell doesn't take long to get through to most of us—he was one of the world's true top musical geniuses—and the countertenor soon loses his oddity and becomes another musical instrument, particularly effective in music such as this where he was originally the proper performer. Purcell himself was a countertenor.

It strikes me that this is Alfred Deller's finest countertenor singing to date, in Vanguard's long series of Deller recordings. His voice in both of these works is stronger, steadier, better controlled than I remember

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