

KERNER'S CONSUMER GUIDE

By Leighton Kerner

This is the first of a series of consumer guides to classical records we expect to appear every three months. Eventually, the flow of new releases and historic reissues may burst the seams of that arrangement. Right now, though, the policy is containment, given the busy-ness of live musical activity in New York these months and the limitations on space.

The intention is to pattern the guide after the pop and jazz guides already published in these pages. Bob Christgau, my editor—and guide, so to speak—gave me the option to grade or not to grade. Until further notice or insurmountable perplexity, I'm grading, pretty much like a report card. A is excellent, B good, C fair, and F terrible, and the plus or minus will be at hand. As for singling out the worst among the period's exhibits, if there is a single worst, the customary abbreviation for pizzicato will be adopted—"Pizz.," pronounced "pits." And the best label I can think of to bestow on the period's best recording is none other than "Best."

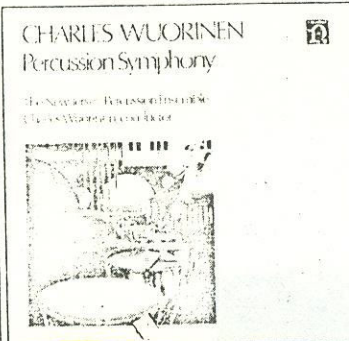
Please understand, however, that all this pertains to a selection of records not confined, given the long-living nature of classical music, to those issued only within the three-month period, although I'll try to stay reasonably current. And there is no method to my selection other than whatever impulse makes you spin a record once again to determine whether it was as marvelous or as putrid as you first thought.

BRITTEN: *Four Sea Interludes and Passacaglia* from *Peter Grimes*; **VAUGHAN WILLIAMS:** *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*. The Philadelphia Orchestra, Eugene Ormandy conducting. (RCA: ARL 1-2744) Britten's storm interlude could use punchier climaxes and the passacaglia a spikier profile, but there's some properly shivery cymbal work as a malevolent dawn breaks, not to mention the expected Philadelphia sumptuousness. The solo and grouped string textures in the Vaughan Williams boast the Stokowskian glamour that Ormandy has been living on for decades. Altogether a resplendent but unnecessary record, considering the competition. **B MINUS.**

CANTATA DA CAMERA: Solo cantatas by Antonio Caldara ("*Vicino a un rivoletto*"), Nicola Porpora ("*Or che una nube ingrata*"), and Handel ("*Mi palpita il cor*"). (ABC Classics. AY-67029.) Not having heard or heard about countertenor Rene Jacobs before, I could hardly believe the steadiness of his tone or the accuracy and taste of his nuanced trills and roulades. He makes the other countertenors sound like factory whistles. If Tomagno, the first Verdi Otello, had a trumpet in his throat, this man has a flute in his. The music is not first class, except for the Handel, but it's more than baroque-pretty, and Gustav Leonhardt and his instrumental colleagues play it with finesse and apparent enthusiasm. **A MINUS.**

LUCIA DLUGOSZEWSKI: *Tender Theatre Flight Nageire* and C. **CURTIS SMITH:** *Unisonics and Music for Handbells*. (CRI SD388). The successive Dlugoszewski works of the past decade have been trippy, exhilarating, lyrical, and electrifying, in turn and sometimes simultaneously. This one is just plain exquisite, and so is its performance by the composer on percussion and a brass ensemble conducted by Gerard Schwarz, who also plays trumpet. Mr. Smith's two pieces are far less ambitious structurally and texturally, but his ideas about blending sax and piano are ingenious and, at least here, successful. **A.**

GERSHWIN: *Rhapsody in Blue*, Alexander Zwasman, piano, and Gennady Rozh-



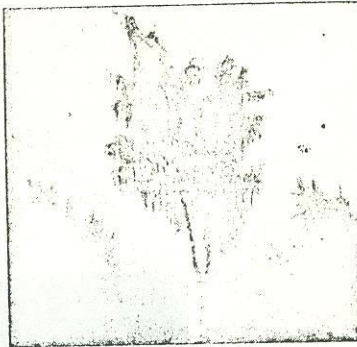
BEST: Wuorinen's Wuorinen

Symphony Orchestra; Piano Concerto in F, Piotr Pechersky, piano, and Kirill Kondrashin, conducting the Moscow Philharmonic Academic Symphony Orchestra (ABC Westminster Gold WG-8355). Although the years have not been kind to the music, both are far more idiomatic than a lot of latter-day big-name American patronizations I've squirmed through. Rozhdestvensky, whether or not he or others tinkered with the orchestration in *Rhapsody*, gets much closer to the original Ferde Grofe instrumentation for Paul Whiteman than any other symphonic conductor in my experience. When its most famous tune takes center stage, the sound-core is happily not lush strings but lean, throaty saxophones. Both pianists play crisply. The only soloistic lapse is Mr. Zwasman's missing the rhythmic point of *Rhapsody*'s blues episode and his brief but itchy bit of over-decoration. *Rhapsody*, incidentally, was recorded in Moscow in 1960, and the Concerto in Riga in 1967. **B PLUS**

ROBERT HELPS: *Gossamer Noons*; **MARC-ANTONIO CONSOLI:** *Odefonia*; American Composers Orchestra, conducted by Gunther Schuller. (CRI SD 384). This assembled-for-new-music orchestra's first recording is especially auspicious because of *Gossamer Noons*, a freshly lyrical, evocatively specific score that completely resists the temptation to feed off the imaginations of the past. Soprano Bethany Beardslee may elocute a bit too much the James Purdy texts, but her musicianship is still a wonder. The Consoli, on the other hand, displays just enough aural ingenuity to raise it two small notches above the tiresomely academic. **B.**

HOROWITZ ENCORES: Liszt: Hungarian Rhapsody No. 19; Horowitz: *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's "Carmen"*; and brief, familiar items by Debussy, Domenico Scarlatti, Rachmaninoff, Moszkowski, Chopin, Scriabin, and Schumann. (Columbia M 35118). A line printed in the jacket's smallest type face reads, "This album contains previously released material," and that, suppose, will keep the FTC away from Columbia's door. Perhaps Horowitz did leave Columbia a few years ago because they merchandised his recordings "as if they were a military secret," and perhaps this potpourri reread is one way of making amends, but it's hardly page-one stuff. True, the Liszt is still a rarity, even without Horowitz's embellishments, and the *Carmen* whizbang sounds like six hands flying, but most of the music here loses something in accumulated strength because it has been wrenched out of original recorded context. **C.**

SCHUBERT: *Die schoene Muellerin*. Julius Patzak, tenor; Walter Klien, pianist. (Turnabout/Vox Historical Series THS 65146). It's hard to fathom why Vox included this excruciatingly dull performance on its extensive, often irreplaceable Turnabout series of historic exhumations. Although Patzak, who died in 1974, was 60 when he made this record in 1958, his voice sounds secure



PIZZ.: Ivanov's Tchaikovsky

Every one of the 20 songs is stuck in the same emotional rut. Not one of them goes beyond the notes to touch the heart, and if this of all cycles doesn't reach you, either you or the performance is dead. *Requiescat in pace. F.*

TCHAIKOVSKY: *Symphony No. 6 in B Minor, Opus 74 ("Pathétique")*. Moscow Radio Large Symphony Orchestra, Konstantin Ivanov conducting. (ABC Classics AY-67034). ABC must have imported this Melodiya product from Moscow (recorded in 1976) as part of a package deal. Let's hope for some real goodies in the rest of the package, but what we have here is another failure to communicate. Such a second-rate orchestra, loud and weepy. Such a third-rate conductor, metronomic yet flabby, if you can believe it. Such a pathetic "Pathétique." This is the kind of record that gives trash a bad name. **F MINUS.**

VERDI: *Otello*, the complete opera, with Plácido Domingo (Otello), Renata Scottò (Desdemona), Sherrill Milnes (Iago) and others. James Levine conducting the National Philharmonic Orchestra and Ambrosian Opera Chorus. (RCA CRL 3-2951, three records). Oh come on, RCA, the ultimate *Otello* recording? Wash your ad campaign out with soap and start again. Also pull the old Toscanini Studio 8-H off the shelves and admit that not even that miracle could be the ultimate, although it's still the most awesome. However, I won't argue with anyone who says Miss Scottò's Desdemona in its totality is the most eloquently sung on records. Claudia Muzio and others may have penetrated more deeply into "Salce, salce" and "Ave Maria," but from first act through last, the present Desdemona sets a new overall standard. Domingo's lyric tenor fares surprisingly well, at least in the studio, with the vocally ball-busting title role, and he delivers the first and second stages of what may well become over the years a dramatically insightful, musically irreproachable interpretation. The musicianship is already there. I'm more apprehensive about the future of Mr. Milnes's Iago. Up to now, his Met performances of the role have been gripping combinations of vocal and histrionic machismo, but on this recording the singing, while pointed and bright, is less subtle, less strong-spined, and less consequential. And the supporting cast is not remarkable except for the vividly characterized Cassio of Frank Little and the sympathetic, authoritative Lodovico of Paul Plishka. Mr. Levine's conducting of the English-based recording orchestra (the album was recorded in London last August) builds up ferocious power for the biggest moments, and never neglects the score's many pages of light-shot lyricism, but imprecisions are disconcertingly frequent. Verdi's spacings between vocal cues sometimes get short shrift, and certain vital points, like Otello's final phrase, lack definition. But there is no lack of definition in the chorus, which sings even its highest notes on pitch and with invigorating presence. And I credit producer Richard Mohr for not overdoing the stereo separa-

reacts in the right-hand speaker while Iago manipulates Cassio in the left-hand one, the verisimilitude works. **B.**

VIVALDI: *Concertos in D Minor (F.I. No. 100) and C Minor (F.I. No. 12)*; **TELEMANN:** *Suite in A Minor*. Jean-Pierre Rampal, flutist; Isaac Stern, violinist; and the Jerusalem Music Center Chamber Orchestra. (Columbia M35133). First the facts. These Vivaldi concerti were composed for two violins and string ensemble, and the Telemann for treble recorder and strings. Here Rampal's flute substitutes for Vivaldi's second violin and for Telemann's recorder. Neither composer is represented at his freshest, but you've heard duller doodlings, at least from Vivaldi. The principal delight on this record is the way Stern thins out his tone to match Rampal in the latter's most sonful, lithe form. That golden-voiced Stern fiddle could easily have mowed the Frenchman down. The violinist conducts the Vivaldi, and the flutist the Telemann, and the orchestra responds like an eager puppy to both. **B PLUS**

CHARLES WUORINEN: *Percussion Symphony*. The New Jersey Percussion Ensemble conducted by the composer. (Nonesuch H-71353). Composed in 1976 and first performed last year by this ensemble, the *Symphony* is a 42-minute, three-movement serial work, the movements separated by relatively brief transcription-reworkings of Dufay's circa-1430 setting of Petrarch's *Vergine bella*. A liner note by the composer suggests that the two "entr'actes" be considered as light, diatonic relief. Be that as it may, the interludes are indeed pleasing, but all the more so is the main, serial body of the work, with its ever-abundant and ever-resourceful structures and trajectories of elegant, stimulating timbres. Interest never flags, and the finale, while shunning any temptation to blast the roof off, whips up a marvelous, contagious excitement. Mr. Wuorinen's liner note pays just tribute to the long preparatory work of the ensemble's director, Raymond DesRoches; the performance is sensitive and dazzling. **A.**

Additional Consumer News: You might think matters were complicated enough for orchestra managements who must plan at least part of each season's programs according to the demands of the record marketplace. If the seismographs of commerce indicate a groundswell of public need for a 74th Schwann catalogue entry under Tchaikovsky *Symphony No. 4* or a 97th *Till Eulenspiegel*, you can't fight it. You program it for the fifth consecutive season, rehearse it five times, four of those times publicly labeled as concerts, and then do it once more, reeling for posterity. The rationale seems to be that, while the stores are stocked with the Philharmonic's such-and-such under Lenny and Pierre and with Zubie's such-and-such from Tel Aviv, you haven't lived until you've heard Zubie and the New York Phil recording such-and-such under a full moon. Hence there was no surprise when the January 25 through 30 program for the local band originally surrounded Janet Baker with such such-and-such as the Brahms "Haydn" Variations and *La Mer*. But matters became more complicated. The taping session has to be postponed, and instead of the record tail merely wagging the concert dog, it pulled the poor animal right off the curb. The Brahms and Dubussy such-and-suches were shelved until a new recording date could be found, when undoubtedly they will replace a so-and-so that some ticket buyers were hoping to hear. In the meantime, Mahler's vast Fifth *Symphony* was quickly squeezed into a breach somewhat too tight for it and rehearsed before a paying audience. Back into