

# KOUSSEVITZKY

Recordings Society



## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

It is my pleasure to welcome two new members to our Advisory Board: David Diamond and Lukas Foss. These two distinguished composers were also among Koussevitzky's closest friends. The Society's Ed Young recently interviewed both, and the conversation with Mr. Diamond appears on page 5 of this issue of our newsletter.

Last summer marked the 50th anniversary of the Music Shed. During the opening night concert of the BSO at Tanglewood, the president of the orchestra's Board of Trustees, George H. Kidder, announced the rededication of the Shed as the "Serge Koussevitzky Music Shed." For the occasion, Seiji Ozawa repeated the program with which Koussevitzky inaugurated the Shed. The featured work was Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, preceded by choruses from Bach's *Ein feste Burg*. As in 1938, the audience was invited to join in the singing of the cantata's final chorale.

Very few films of Koussevitzky exist, but one is **currently available** on VHS video cassette. In 1943, the *March of Time* newsreel series included a film called "Upbeat in Music." In it, a brief portion (about two minutes) of a Boston Symphony rehearsal may be seen. Koussevitzky leads the ensemble as it prepares for a performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, probably for the concerts of Friday and Saturday, March 5 and 6, 1943. The tape comes from Embassy Video (#1725) and is entitled, "Show Business: The War Years 1939-1945." The cassette also includes three other (non-SK) *March of Time* newsreels from the period.

For CD collectors, an all-Koussevitzky disc is now available on Japanese RCA. Some larger American record stores will probably carry the disc, although it may not be worth the price. My review of the CD will be found on page 15. According to Stradivari Classics General Manager Michael E. Fine, they, too, are planning to make several Koussevitzky recordings available on compact disc. We'll have more information on this in our fall newsletter.

The Boston Symphony has also issued a Koussevitzky CD (or cassette) as their 1989 "Salute to Symphony Gift Incentive." The disc includes the *finales* from Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony and Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, Strauss's *Don Juan*, Hanson's Serenade for Flute, Harp and Strings, Cowell's *Hymn and Fuguing Tune #2* and the first movement of Shostakovich's Symphony #8. The Strauss, Hanson and Cowell have previously had only limited release, while the Shostakovich has never before been available in any format. This recording may be obtained for a \$50 contribution to the orchestra. Write to the Volunteer Office, Symphony Hall, Boston, MA 02115 or call (617) 266-1492, ext. 247 to order or for further information.

Meanwhile, the Society's own cassette issue has been delayed longer than we had expected. However, our negotiations are progressing, and we hope to have a cassette ready for our members later this year.

Radio listeners will be pleased to know that the wonderful National Public Radio series *A Note to You* plans to devote three programs to Koussevitzky. These programs will feature interviews with Nicolas Slonimsky, Harry Ellis Dickson and Boris Goldovsky. As of the time of this publication, the air dates of these programs had not been set. Check with your local public radio station for possible local broadcast times. Indeed, you might also suggest to that station that they commemorate the anniversary of Koussevitzky's birth on July 26th. I'd be happy to supply them with broadcast quality tapes. They may contact me in care of WSIU Radio, Communications Building, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901.

Our excellent sister organization, the Beecham Society, celebrates its 25th anniversary this year with a gala edition of its journal, *Le Grand Baton*. The Society was formed in 1964 to promote the memory of Beecham and his contemporaries. Membership in the Society is a real bargain at \$10. Their address is Executive Secretary, The Sir Thomas Beecham Society, 664 South Irena Avenue, Redondo Beach, CA 90277.

Thanks to Ed Young, Tony Donley and all our contributors for their assistance in the preparation of this newsletter.

Tom Godell, President

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## KOUSSEVITZKY'S RECORDINGS

The recordings of the Boston Symphony under Serge Koussevitzky provide, as a group, unique documentation of the performance practice of his day<sup>1</sup>. They represent a small part of his repertoire and cover some twenty-two years, from 1928 to 1950. Koussevitzky chose for his first sessions Stravinsky's Suite from *Pétrouchka* and the Beethoven Sixth (*Pastoral*) Symphony. Although electrical reproduction of musical sound was introduced only three years before, the sound is quite good, despite the limited frequency range and presence. Most of the discs made in 1929 and 1930 were rerecorded in the 40s, except for the Moussorgsky-Ravel *Pictures at an Exhibition* (10/28-30/30, Victor M-102), an imposing performance with which the conductor was apparently satisfied.

From 1931 to 1934, Koussevitzky made no commercial recording for the Victor Corporation. In the spring of 1933, he journeyed to England where the British Victor affiliate, His Master's Voice, transcribed a public performance of the Sibelius Seventh Symphony (5/15/33, originally issued in this country as Victor M-394) with the BBC Symphony. This is a significant set, since the conductor never recorded the work with the BSO. A radio transcription of a BSO rehearsal exists, broadcast over NBC, dating from Koussevitzky's final 1948/49 season<sup>2</sup> and preserved on acetate discs. There was also a broadcast of a complete performance of the Symphony on April 20, 1946 (issued on a Rococo LP, #21031).

In late January 1935, the Boston Symphony returned to recording activity with Victor with Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1/24/35, M-257), the Sibelius Second Symphony (1/24/35, M-272) and the Mendelssohn *Italian* (1/23/35, M-294). These productions, especially the Strauss, were hailed as a great advance in the recording of symphonic sound. David Hall noted that the *Zarathustra* discs were stunning in impact and continued, "It lives not by virtue of coyly lyric passages, but pages of incredible brilliance and daring imagination. We have heard many conductors essay this score, but none with the utter assurance and overwhelming power of Koussevitzky and his Boston Symphony<sup>3</sup>."

The Sibelius Second was controversial because of the somewhat slow tempo in the first movement, but was otherwise a great success both as a recording and performance. Although redone in his last session (11/29/50, LM-1172), the earlier version is preferable in terms of spontaneity and unanimity of execution. Concerning the Mendelssohn, Hall stated that the conductor "favors fast *tempi*, but the reading is carried out with such peerless tonal sheen and *éclat* that it is almost impossible not to sense the rightness of it all<sup>4</sup>."

For a year following Koussevitzky made no new recordings, until a busy week in early May of 1936, when the orchestra produced an extensive series. With the exception of Vivaldi's Concerto Grosso in D Minor in the Alex-

ander Siloti arrangement (5/8/36, M-886), the rest of the music was confined to the Romantics, highlighted by the Schubert *Unfinished* and the Tchaikovsky Fourth.

In December 1936, the conductor and the orchestra recorded three symphonies: Beethoven's 8th, Sibelius's 5th and Haydn's 102nd. The latter was the work's first appearance on disc (12/29/36, M-529), and in the words of Hall it is "a stunning performance and recording<sup>5</sup>." The set was never reissued on LP, and only collectors can hear this remarkable likeness of the BSO.

In the Spring of 1937, Victor engineers recorded the complete Bach *St. Matthew Passion* (3/26/37, M-411/2/3) at a special Pension Fund Concert. The work took up three bulky albums consisting of some thirty discs. Although an imperfect production from a technical standpoint, with some awkward side breaks occurring in the middle of phrases, a substantial number of copies were sold, and it was considered a landmark in recording science.

There were no other recordings that year until late December, when violinist Jascha Heifetz joined with the Boston Symphony for the first recording of Prokofiev's Second Violin Concerto (11/20/37, M-450), the work having been given its American premiere only three days before. In addition, Koussevitzky recorded Prokofiev's *Lieutenant Kijé* Suite (11/22/37, M-459), Mozart's Symphony #29 (12/22/37, M-795) and the C.P.E. Bach Concerto for Orchestra in an arrangement by Maximilian Steinberg (12/27/37, M-559). The next year more discs were made, and from then until 1940 the Boston sessions occurred at regular intervals, in late fall and early spring.

Among this group was Koussevitzky's celebrated reading of Debussy's *La Mer* (12/1/38 and 11/7/39, M-643). Apparently the conductor was dissatisfied with the first session and demanded a second one to complete the work. When the discs were reissued in Britain in the late 1960s, the opening of the first movement was found to be slower than in previous issues<sup>6</sup>. The Brahms Fourth Symphony was done in similar fashion; the results were uneven in sound and performance. Certain sides betray the fact that they were made a year later, the sound on them being considerably better and clearer.

After 1940, the Boston Symphony made no records, but continued to broadcast their regular concert series. Many of these radio performances may exist on transcription discs of this period. The Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound at the New York Public Library contain a large number of these discs, but the catalogue is incomplete at present. This is a notable list, including the Beethoven Seventh, Brahms First and Franck D Minor Symphonies (all commercially unrecorded).

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With the lifting of the Petrillo ban, the Boston Symphony resumed work for Victor in November of 1944, and until Koussevitzky retired, discs were made at regular intervals (there was another recording ban in effect for the whole of 1948, interrupting the schedule), and a fairly representative series was produced. The complete *Brandenburg* Concertos and *Orchestral Suites* of Bach were recorded at Tanglewood in the summers from 1945 to 1949. The first recording of Berlioz's *Harold in Italy* was made with violist William Primrose (11/28/44, M-989).

When the Beethoven *Eroica* (October 1945) was reissued in Britain in 1970, the critics, attuned to the literal school of playing, took exception to Koussevitzky's idiosyncratic approach, finding it almost beyond comprehension. One English critic exclaimed: "Only Koussevitzky devotees are likely to be convinced by the eccentric *Eroica* with arbitrary changes of tempi and lack of feeling for structure. The performance is often physically exciting, but there is not much depth to it."<sup>7</sup> In contrast, David Hall remarked when the set was new that "we were quite taken with what we heard. The two opening movements still packed tremendous wallop. Add to this the magnificent playing of the BSO and a really high-powered recording, and we have a generally acceptable domestic recording of [the *Eroica*]. It may not be definitive as a Toscanini performance, but it most certainly outstrips most of the readily available competition."<sup>8</sup>

In comparing the Koussevitzky and Toscanini versions of another Beethoven recording, the *Egmont* Overture, I found the earlier BSO version superior. In the summer of 1947, there was a concert devised to demonstrate the technical superiority of the new Berkshire phonograph manufactured by RCA. The first half of the *Egmont* was led by Koussevitzky and the BSO up to a certain point. From there the orchestra stopped playing and the recording of the work continued to the end. The audience went away unable to distinguish between the live performance and the record<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, having heard this disc, it is clear the sound was captured faithfully. There is a magnificence of sound, despite the surface noise.

It seems a superior performance to the Toscanini of early 1953. If the NBC recording is heard alone, it sounds convincing and valid. By comparison with the BSO disc, it

is rushed and less dignified. Within the various sections of the overture, the Toscanini version seems too businesslike. The introduction is taken in strict tempo, and in the ensuing allegro, the musicians sound hard pressed to get their notes out. The BSO version, on the other hand, at slightly slower tempo, conveys the steady progression to a goal. It is full of drama and excitement. The coda shows the difference of approach best. One might term the Toscanini concept as operatic. Again the tempo is too fast, and the "victory" symphony is played like the long crescendo of a Rossini overture. The Koussevitzky version starts out in a more measured manner, builds to a climax, and seems more convincing.

Vincent Schwerin

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Most of the information for this article is derived from the booklet published by the Koussevitzky Recordings Association which accompanied their Koussevitzky Legacy radio series.

<sup>2</sup>Broadcast in December 1948. The BSO program books for the concert of December 17 & 18 indicate the commencement of these radio rehearsal broadcasts, which continued regularly into the Münch era.

<sup>3</sup>David Hall, *The Record Book*, (New York: Durrell, 1948), p. 1181.

<sup>4</sup>Hall, p. 823.

<sup>5</sup>Hall (earlier edition 1940), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup>John L. Holmes, *Conductors on Record* (Westport: Greenwood, 1982), p. 360.

<sup>7</sup>Holmes, p. 360.

<sup>8</sup>Hall, p. 293.

<sup>9</sup>Leonard Marcus, "My First Celebrity," *High Fidelity*, June 1969, p. 4.

## INTERVIEW WITH DAVID DIAMOND

Rochester, New York 6/28/88

"I say this is an outrage. Such a gifted American composer should not have to earn his living in this way. America should not permit it!" So wrote Serge Koussevitzky in the April 24, 1944 issue of *Life Magazine* upon learning that David Diamond was earning his living by playing in radio's Hit Parade Orchestra.

Diamond was born in Rochester on July 9, 1915. He began his studies at the Cleveland Institute of Music and continued them at the Eastman School. He went on to study composition in New York with Roger Sessions and in Paris with Nadia Boulanger. Upon returning to New York, various grants and awards (not to mention work on the Hit Parade) allowed him to pursue his compositional ambitions. David Ewen in *The Complete Book of Twentieth Century Music* described him as "an unashamed romanticist who spoke his heart freely with emotional outbursts, rich harmonic textures and vivid orchestral colors."

Although Koussevitzky commissioned Diamond's Fourth Symphony, he never had the opportunity to record any of his works. Fortunately, air-checks of the Koussevitzky/Boston Symphony performance of Diamond's Second Symphony and the rehearsal of the *Rounds for String Orchestra* have been preserved in the archives of the Koussevitzky Recordings Society. The Society's Ed Young interviewed Diamond at his Rochester home last year.

**Ed Young:** Perhaps you could share with us your memories of how you first met Dr. Koussevitzky.

**David Diamond:** I met Koussevitzky through Aaron Copland. I was studying at the Dalcroze Institute and New Music School with Roger Sessions, and I had met Copland in the spring of '35. The first thing he said to me was, "I think you ought to meet this astonishing man."

He quizzed me a little bit and wanted to know whether I had really known how much Koussevitzky had done for contemporary music. He didn't mention American music, because he hadn't really done much at that time. He had done a few of the Boston composers in the 20s when he was there, like Foote, Edward Burlingame Hill and early pieces of Walter Piston. Koussevitzky was a very remarkable man because he sought out the American composers actually. Copland asked me whether I realized that he had also given many premieres of works of the great French and Russian composers. In other words, Copland was quizzing me to see whether this kid from Rochester was as smart as he had been told that I was.

I was a walking encyclopedia, because I spent most of my high school years in the Sibley Music Library here at the Eastman School. Then, when I became a student at Eastman, I was always in the library. I was bored stiff

with the classes there. That's one reason I left after one year. I had *had* it because [Howard] Hanson and I just didn't see eye to eye, and he was always saying things like: "Now David, you are such a talented young man. Why do you have to write such modernist music?"

Well, what he considered modernist is not to be believed. Highly chromatic music would be modernist. But I can assure you that what I was writing then was not half as "modern" as his *Lament for Beowulf*, a piece that really today is quite startling for its quartal harmony. He was a peculiar man. He didn't have a wide tolerance. He's another one who was played by Koussevitzky and really was put on the map by Koussevitzky. Koussevitzky had played his early symphonies and then the other symphonies of his.

So Hanson and I didn't remain on very good terms. But every time we bumped somewhere and had to serve on committees in the following years, we always talked about how wonderful Koussevitzky was to the American composer. Then I would let him have it saying, "That's what you wanted to do, too, but you never really accomplished it, did you Howard?" He turned red in his usual way and pulled at his little beard.

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But, to come back to Copland. He was the man who really got Koussevitzky interested in the American composer, whereas Hanson did not very much. He was too involved in his own music to try to encourage any other composers.

**EY:** When Dr. Koussevitzky was preparing your works, did you find that he was changing a lot of things and playing things in a way that would be a great deal different from the way you had intended or expected?

**DD:** No, not to that degree. I've heard stories from other composers that he had a tendency to do that, but I wrote the kind of music that wouldn't give too much leeway for any kind of stretching of tempo. After all, his generation conducted a lot of Tchaikovsky. He wasn't very good at Stravinsky particularly, because you have to be very precise. Stravinsky wanted everything metronomically correct, and Koussevitzky liked to stretch things out, which is why Bernstein does pretty much the same thing today.

The only thing I was amazed about in his performance, even at the end of his life, the last years he was

conducting, was that he had not begun to get slower and slower at all, but he did put in what you call *rubati*, that is stealing a little time from here and there. He'd stretch things out for expressive reasons, which is a sort of 19th century or late romantic way of conducting. It comes from that tradition of [Artur] Nikisch.

But my music didn't lend itself to that, especially the *Rounds* [for String Orchestra, composed 1944]. You had to absolutely beat, "Tick, tock, tick, tock..." He rather liked that, because he said to me, "It gives me lots of pleasure." He had a wonderful way of mixing French with fractured English, fractured French and some Russian. When I told him my parents had come from Poland and they spoke Ukrainian, of course he would allow himself to use Russian and Ukrainian words, too, and some German.

But he was absolutely extraordinary at the rehearsals. When he'd be enthusiastic about something he would stop and say, "I vill tell you sawmting. I vill tell you that diss iss most beautiful music. Und you must play zo," then he'd sort of sing -- make a ghastly sound. The orchestra would wonder what in god's name he meant by this terrible sound that came out of him. Well, Toscanini was like that, too. He would growl things and the orchestra would get hysterical with laughter because it sounded so terrible.

You know there are tales about Koussevitzky being really, in the long run, not a very good musician. That's nonsense. He was a very good musician. That was all built up by resentful orchestra musicians, because he was rather rude to many of them. That was the tradition again of the late 19th century, that the conductor kept his men in the orchestra very much under the whip; tight reigns. No friendly give and take between them at all.

EY: How did Koussevitzky come to be interested in your musical compositions?

DD: After Copland had introduced me that early on, I would submit works to him almost annually, and each time he would read through them I found out from [concertmaster Richard] Burgin, because Tanglewood had begun; so I'd go, and I'd hear rumors, or he'd see me and come up to me and say, "Too ce-reb-ral, that last piece." I would say, "I don't understand why." It's a piece today that nobody considers cerebral, the *Elegy in Memory of Maurice Ravel*.

Ravel had died in the winter of 1937, and I wrote this *Elegy*. Copland thought that Koussevitzky would be interested in it, because he wanted to do something since he had commissioned Ravel to make the arrangement of *Pictures at an Exhibition* of Moussorgsky. So perhaps it would be good to begin the program with my *Elegy*, but no, he had it read through, and it was "too ce-reb-ral." Years later he didn't think it was too cerebral.

I would send pieces, but then he heard a lousy perfor-

mance that Hanson did at Columbia University for the Ditson Fund of my *Rounds*. It was typical Hanson nonsense. He rehearsed his own Symphony for most of the time and left twenty minutes for my *Rounds*. It was butchered. They could barely get through the notes, because he hadn't rehearsed it. Koussevitzky caught on to this, and he let Hanson have it. I just told Koussevitzky (I was that kind of a young man), "Ask him. He's doing the same thing in New York that he does in Rochester. He rehearses his own music all the time." Koussevitzky said, "Hovard, you did thees?" Howard turned red. He was always getting red, but would never say anything more than "Ah, ah, ah..." That's what happened. Then Koussevitzky turned to me and said, "I vill show how ve play diss piece." And by god, he did! Wonderful performances of the *Rounds*. Then Howard didn't talk to me for two more years.

After the *Rounds*, he said that he wanted to commission a work. That's when I wrote the Fourth Symphony. Once he had known the Second Symphony, then he played everything, only if it was a first performance. Other works I had given to Ormandy or Stokowski, then he didn't play them. He wanted only first performances. That's one reason with Piston being up there, and all the composers who lived in Boston, it was fine. Piston would write every new symphony, and there would be a first performance by Koussevitzky.

We got on very, very well. I must say the success he had with the Second Symphony made him very happy, and that's why he wrote that wonderful article, I think it was for the *Boston Globe*, saying -- this is before the Copland Symphony, before William Schuman's later symphonies -- "Here is something very national," meaning it's very American.

I'm not so sure, because when [Arnold] Schönberg heard the broadcast, which he did on Saturday night, and I saw Schönberg in Hollywood in 1949, he said to me, "How come you don't ask me whether you should write in the twelve note technique?" And I said, "Well, I don't think that I have any talent for it." He said, "I never really had talent for it. My best music is Wagnerian music, too. Anyway, you're a young Bruckner. I heard your Second Symphony. That's young Bruckner music." That's really the influence, Bruckner, except for the last movement, which is sort of a very hoe-down kind of music before Copland began doing it.

Lots of people forget that many had done it before Copland had "invented" that style. One hears my First Violin and Piano Sonata, which Copland loved, or you hear my pieces from the 30s, especially *TOM* [ballet after E.E. Cummings, 1936-7]. Copland didn't begin writing these things until the late 30s. The 40s is when he does *Appalachian Spring*.

I think there was a whole school of my generation who were writing real, American-sounding music before Copland, before Roy Harris, Siegmeyer, or Alex North.

But we did not make it as fast as they did. You see they were the first, top ones, and so Roy Harris's First and Third Symphonies were what was heard, not my Second Symphony. That comes later. That comes in the 40s.

EY: In the recording of the broadcast of your Second Symphony [10/14/44], I was particularly struck by the beautiful string passages, and the way the Boston Symphony under Koussevitzky played them with that very heavy vibrato.

DD: That's why Koussevitzky liked the piece, because I gave in my orchestration many large sections, especially in the slow music, to the strings.

EY: Is it true that you composed your Second Symphony for Mitropoulos?

DD: I wrote it with the hope that Mitropoulos would play it, because he had given the premiere of my First Symphony with the New York Philharmonic, and he was so pleased with it. That was a very tight, economical work. He said, "Now, your next symphony must be big. I want a big, wonderful symphony," and so I thought I did it. The war was on, and I was very depressed.

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Mitropoulos hoped to give it with the Minneapolis Orchestra. When I sent him the score, and I must say he was an extraordinarily generous man, he paid for the copying of the parts and the duplication of the score. I had sent a copy of the score to Koussevitzky as well, because I had heard rumors that Mitropoulos might not be staying on in Minneapolis, that he was going to do much more guest conducting.

I thought, well, I didn't want the Symphony to just sit around for a couple of years waiting for a conductor to do it, so I sent one score to Koussevitzky and one to Mitropoulos. I told Mitropoulos that I'd done that, not knowing that they were not on good terms. It shows again what a wonderful human being Mitropoulos was, because he said, "I think it would be wonderful if Koussevitzky did it. After all, I did your First Symphony with the New York Philharmonic. He should do the Second Symphony." Later on he [Mitropoulos] would commission the *Rounds*, so I thought Mitropoulos was being an absolute saint, which he was.

Koussevitzky had John Burk, the program annotator of the Boston Symphony, send me a telegram stating that Koussevitzky was reading the Symphony and telling me when to appear at Symphony Hall. This was some time in the very early part of the spring of '44. Howard Han-

son had the parts, and was reading through it. Of course, he sent the parts to Boston the moment he was through with his reading.

By the time I got to Boston, the reading began. Sitting with me in the hall were Koussevitzky, Quincy Porter and Douglas Moore. Burgin the concertmaster conducted the run-through. They didn't stop once, and it's a long symphony. They went right through it, you see. So, he had the reading, and he was that sure that it was for him. He said, "I vill play," just like that. Sure enough, I had a telegram from his personal secretary, Olga Naumoff, whom he later married, stating that the work was scheduled for the 13th and 14th of October, 1944, and that it would be on the broadcast with the Foote *Suite for Strings*. The other half of the concert included a Tchaikovsky Symphony.

In my diary, I wrote about the rehearsals for the premiere performance and the broadcast:

Koussevitzky was ill with a cold, and Burgin would take over the rehearsals. Koussevitzky had made a few cuts of his own in order to fit it into the radio hour. This angered me terribly. I called him and told him this, and Koussie said to rehearse all morning without cuts.

I was immediately impressed. A splendid workout, and the men gave me a fine ovation. I was thrilled and grateful. A taxi out to Brookline, where Koussevitzky received me warmly. He remained in bed, and we mutually agreed on cuts. Koussevitzky said he would reinstate them for New York, but this had to be done in order to get it all into the radio hour. Lunch there with Miss Naumoff and a Russian woman named Mrs. Hirschmann. Then back to Koussie, who reviewed the cuts and decided finally that he would do the Symphony without cuts and would hurry the Foote, which opened the program.

He gave me a suit of his and ties to wear to Friday's concert. He was not satisfied with the suit I was wearing, but the trousers do not fit and they are spotted. He said to take them over to the tailor. I'm impressed by his generosity, but rather angry that he didn't think I looked well enough. He said he would pay all my expenses.

Even with the Friday afternoon audience, it had a wonderful success. Those ladies were terrible in general. They just talked a lot. They weren't interested in applauding. But, my god, the guys from Harvard! Wow! All in the back section, those yells that were coming 'round. Robert Lowell, the poet, was among them and Arthur Berger, Irving Fine and a few other young students.

EY: It's got wonderful melodies in it. As I sit here I've got that theme from the first movement running through my mind. I've gotten to like the symphony very much.



*Serge Koussevitzky and David Diamond*

**DD:** Well, I wish those lazy young-uns would get to play it. This is *the* problem. If Koussevitzky were alive today, he would say terrible things about it.

The young American conductors are scandalous. They go to Europe, and they don't bring the American composer's music, but they are forced to play composers of that country. Now Mark Elder, who's going to be our new conductor year after next, finally wrote me a letter that he would like to meet with me, that he's rather upset to find that I have not appeared on a Rochester Philharmonic program. There have been several articles in the papers about the neglect of my music in Rochester. You know the old saying about the prophet without honor -- it's still true. All composers were treated that way, except in Boston.

**EY:** For a time, you played in the Hit Parade Orchestra, which Koussevitzky mentioned in his *Life* magazine article.

**DD:** I was broke in New York in those early years, and I had been trained as a violinist. I was a member of the Local 802 in New York. Mark Warnow, who had heard a great deal about me and had heard my music, thought

it was terrible that I couldn't get a teaching job anywhere. Those were the years when it was very hard. Columbia University was run by a very conservative anti-Semite named Daniel Gregory Mason. There was no chance. Douglas Moore was teaching there, knew me and liked my music, but couldn't get me in there.

It was that way everywhere, even here [Rochester], of course. Hanson would never think of giving me a job, because I was always upsetting people. There was no possible way of getting a teaching job in those years. So, I said, "I'll do an audition if you like, Mr. Warnow." He said, "No, no, no. A lot of the men in the orchestra were former members of the New York Philharmonic. You'll enjoy it and the music." So I went.

I remember the first rehearsal. I said, "Is nothing going to be in 5/8 time? Is everything going to be in 2/2?" Now and then there was a waltz. When *Oklahoma* came out, we did those waltzes. So I would say to Warnow, "Let's sneak a 5/8 in here in this arrangement." He thought it was funny and said, "We'll do it just for you." But George Washington Hill, the head of the Lucky Strike Tobacco Company censored everything. [Lucky Strike sponsored the Hit Parade.] He had to hear it. Acetates



had to be sent off immediately once we had finished, and if there was something in the orchestration, if there was a chord that had a major ninth in it, out it went. Everything had to be very simple, very clean.

Well, he had soloists every week, and at that time Frank Sinatra was starting out. One earned \$95 net for two days of work: one day of rehearsal, the next day final rehearsal, then two performances, one to the West Coast, and one for the live New York audience, and that was that. \$95 a week in those years was quite enough. So I could get my music written and not waste a lot of time with teaching. In many ways it was a better thing to do. Copland thought it was a great idea. So did others.

But I have to thank a man named Nicolai Berezowsky, who had played in the CBS Symphony. Bernard Herrmann [the conductor of the orchestra] got me to do music for *The Man Behind the Gun* and *Hear It Now*, the Edward R. Murrow show. Berezowsky, with whom I'd studied violin when I first came to New York in '34, went to Warnow. I was then living at Yaddo. I was broke. There was no place to go, and I didn't want to come here because my mother and father lived here with my sister, her husband and child. I felt that that was pushing myself on them. So I went to the artist's colony called Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, and there Mrs. Ames put me up for almost an entire winter and part of the spring.

Then Berezowsky sent me a letter with a violin, because my violin had been stolen, and I had no instrument. He included this violin with a piggy bank with spending money, to which all of the men in the CBS Symphony contributed, because lots of them had played my music. They thought it was awful that I should be reduced to this situation. I didn't play in the CBS Symphony because those men were on contract annually. They went on year after year with Bernard Herrmann. The *Invitation to Music* program that he conducted could not get me in, but Benny Herrmann did get me other things, like writing cues. So between the writing cues, and the playing in the Hit Parade, which I enjoyed very much, I was able to make a fairly good living and give my time to my music.

When Koussevitzky heard about this (he evidently had been planning or had suggested to *Life* magazine that he make some statement about the American composer), he felt by now, the mid-40s, that there was definitely a school of American composition that one could identify, a real American style. So he wrote this article for *Life* which was edited very carefully, but all really his thoughts and his statements. I was singled out by him as one of the most gifted of the youngest of the Americans, but what a shame that I had to make my living by playing in the Hit Parade Orchestra.

I thought it was rather funny because I enjoyed it thoroughly. I liked the men in the orchestra, I enjoyed Mark Warnow, I loved being with those marvelous singers. Of course, you really couldn't hear them, because they were singing into the microphone. Nothing like today, wear-

ing the earphones. They didn't ever wear those. All we could see were lips moving. But, then, when I'd go back and listen to the playbacks and I heard Sinatra, I couldn't believe the phrasing of this man. I thought I was listening to Jascha Heifetz "on the voice," because it was so beautiful the way he phrased, and his voice was a very good baritone.

Today one thinks of that period as I do, and I realize that I enjoyed it very much, but I'm sorry that Koussevitzky felt it was demeaning. His was a 19th century, Romantic attitude that the composer was up there in *Valhalla* with the gods, so that's not what you were supposed to do. But I noticed that he didn't do anything in particular, except he commissioned me to write the Fourth Symphony.

EY: Koussevitzky played contemporary music before he came to Boston, didn't he?

DD: Koussevitzky's career in Paris was playing premieres of Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Martinu and so many others. And, of course, he had the famous *Editions Russe de Musique*, his own publishing firm. Stravinsky and Prokofiev were both published by Koussevitzky. It was his wife's money, but it was put into that good use. In a way it was wonderful. When he was in Russia, he had invited Debussy to come. He had an orchestra that went up and down the Volga, and he invited Debussy to conduct that orchestra. He invited Scriabin to play as soloist with him. He published Scriabin's *Prometheus, the Poem of Fire* and *Le Sacre* of Stravinsky.

He didn't get to Boston until 1924. Immediately, he began to show an interest in Copland and played Copland's First Symphony. And that because Nadia Boulanger and Koussevitzky were great friends, and Copland had studied with Boulanger. I had studied with Boulanger as well. That tied us together. So there was the Boulanger connection. They were friends from Paris. In that way Copland got played by Koussevitzky through Boulanger, and I got played through Boulanger and Copland.

Koussevitzky was a tremendous figure in contemporary music always because of his Paris reputation. I'm sure that's why he was brought to Boston. More than that, he was an extremely alluring man. He had everything. People still talk about the Koussevitzky back. He had suits fitted. For a short man (he was shorter than I was; actually, I'm five feet seven, and he was five feet six), he was so beautifully proportioned. In wonderfully tailored clothes he looked absolutely like a *Matinée* Idol. The women loved him, and he had great success in Boston.

But the men in the orchestra made life miserable for him, because they would try to catch him and say, "He doesn't know how to conduct irregular meters." And the story that Nicolas Slonimsky had to rebar the *Sacre du Printemps*, which to a certain degree is true. But, he con-

ducted; he got through it in Slonimsky's rebarring. But then Stravinsky'd admitted that it was pretty difficult for him to conduct, too, and he invented those rhythms!

It wasn't true that Koussevitzky couldn't read scores. Well, how could the man compose? He made Bach transcriptions. He made other transcriptions. No, the man read very, very well. He did not have an easy facility at the keyboard, but he knew score reading very well. He could read transpositions, so that's a lot of nonsense about Koussevitzky being illiterate really.

EY: Slonimsky claims that it was Glière who composed the Double Bass Concerto that bears Koussevitzky's name. Do you know anything about that?

DD: I had never heard that story.

EY: Olga Koussevitzky once told me that Slonimsky and Koussevitzky were not on the best of terms.

DD: They argued about musical things, and the fact, I had heard, that Koussevitzky wanted him there morning, noon and night at his beck and call, in order to play through the scores [on the piano] while he [Koussevitzky] conducted. He did work on the scores that way, which is very different from most other conductors, but a lot of conductors did do that in Europe.

But Glière having written Koussevitzky's Double Bass Concerto? I doubt that very much. That sounds to me like a fabrication in order to get back at Koussevitzky. First of all, it would be a risky thing to do. Glière was very well known. Also, I don't hear any Glière in the Koussevitzky Concerto. I know Glière's music, especially music of that period. It has nothing of Glière in it, his style. Also, I saw Koussevitzky's manuscript of the concerto. I saw the piano reduction, which was by another copyist, but Koussevitzky's orchestral score is in his own hand. It's not in Glière's handwriting.

EY: I wonder if we could get your memories of Koussevitzky's baton technique. I never saw or heard Koussevitzky live. I first heard him when I was about 14 years old in 1957, on the 78s and early LPs. I never saw him conduct until I saw the film, *The Tanglewood Story*, that was made in 1949.

DD: That's a very good one, would give you a good idea. But remember, he's already an old man.

EY: Actually in that whole film there's only about eight minutes of Koussevitzky conducting, and that was just a few weeks before his retirement in August of 1949. Then there's another film from 1943. He's doing a little piece of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* in a rehearsal. Certainly his baton technique, compared to the modern conductor's, I would think, would be awfully hard to follow. I'm a non-musician, but it seems to me that the baton technique of the new conductors is so lucid. Even as a neophyte, I can sit there and look at them, and it seems as though everything they do makes complete sense.

DD: Well, they are very influenced by the Fritz Reiner and George Szell technique, which was precision, small beats. Now, Koussevitzky conducted in small beats. There he was, for a conductor who really based his own technique on Nikisch, because when he was in Berlin and he bought up his small orchestra to begin training himself, his model was Nikisch, and Nikisch's beat was a rather large beat. Evidently Koussevitzky had early on realized, I suppose, that a small beat would get you better results in time reaction from the orchestra, because it takes a certain amount of time, depending on the tempo you are beating in, to get the response from the player blowing or touching the string. You have to give what they call an anticipation beat.

Koussevitzky's was a small baton. He didn't like to use the big ones. He was very precise, and he used his left hand for expression only, which is really what one should use. Conductors today who use the left hand for beating really are not good conductors at all. Now I can understand as Bernstein is getting older and as conductors develop rheumatism and arthritis, I can understand to rest the right hand you begin conducting with your left hand. Then you go back. But you don't conduct with two hands beating as I've seen some do. That's nonsense. The left hand should be for dynamics and cueing, while the right hand keeps beating.

But Koussevitzky was wonderful. How could a man who doesn't have a wonderful stick technique have the gall to start a Tanglewood and begin with four marvelous young talents, of which the most famous was Bernstein? Now Bernstein came from Reiner's class at the Curtis Institute, where the beat was so tiny, but this was Reiner's particular genius. They had to follow this tiny beat. The louder the music got, the smaller and lower it got. You never heard such a sound as he got by conducting this way. So it's not true that you have to do all that Bernstein does, but that's Bernstein's very Romantic, Koussevitzky-Stokowski thing.

Koussevitzky's technique was a rather wonderful one, otherwise you can't teach and produce so many wonderful talents. It's true that Bernstein did eventually take over most of the teaching assignments. Part of the enjoyment of going to Tanglewood in the early years was to sit in the Shed there and watch Koussevitzky rehearse, especially with the students. Remember the war was on, and he had this very special orchestra of students.

It was marvelous to see him work with the students. The man had a phenomenal way of getting through to a young conducting talent, very much as Bernstein does today. That's why he, I think, will end up doing what Koussevitzky did. More and more he is going across the country with young conductors. I notice he is giving a concert in New York. He conducts the Shostakovich First Symphony, and then his three young favorite conductors will conduct other works.

EY: I guess it was quite a disappointment for Koussevit-

zky when the Boston Symphony management didn't want his young, hand-chosen successors [Bernstein and Eleazar de Carvalho] in Boston.

DD: Oh, he was very disappointed, but what can one do? It was like Rochester in those years, too. Anybody who had a scandalous reputation of any kind, let alone being Jewish in Boston at that time. What was amazing was that Koussevitzky got the job, but he was a converted Jew, so that made it all right. I can assure you that the anti-Semitism in Boston was very bad. That and stories about Bernstein's personal life. I remember discussions with Koussevitzky telling Lenny that he should change his name to Leonard Burns. Lenny just guffawed and found it ridiculous.

Bernstein couldn't even get the job here in Rochester, and he'd already had that fabulous success in 1943 with the New York Philharmonic. He comes here a year later as a guest conductor and wows everybody. The audience went crazy for him. They wanted him as the conductor. But the manager of the orchestra, Arthur See, and Howard Hanson, who put in his five cents, did not. So there was no chance of Lenny getting in here at all. Their story was that it was because he was a Jew, but I know otherwise.

EY: I think it broke Koussevitzky's heart that he wasn't able to continue to have that influence with the orchestra.

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*I was absolutely knocked out by it, especially what he did in the slow movement of the Second Symphony. I thought it was so beautiful.*

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DD: Well, he guided Münch very beautifully into the job. He helped bring him. He got him the job. That was Koussevitzky's doing to invite Münch, because there were so many others that the management was considering. It was Koussevitzky's convincing statements at the meetings, saying, "Münch is the one who follows best my particular style of conducting and technique." He invited him to come and guest conduct, and the ladies were taken with him at once.

EY: During the 1949 season, Koussevitzky conducted your *Rounds*.

DD: I went to Boston to hear the performances there. Then, of course, Koussie brought it for his all-American concert to New York. He repeated the whole American program: Sam Barber's Cello Concerto, William Schuman's *American Festival Overture*, my *Rounds*, and something of Copland and Hanson. Imagine doing that. Very few conductors gave all-American programs in those years.

EY: *Rounds* won a prize, too.

DD: It won the Music Critics Circle Prize. Too bad Koussevitzky didn't record it for Victor, but they wouldn't do it. There are many reasons why my pieces did not get recorded, but Copland could say the same thing, too, at that time. Remember Copland, only when he began conducting and recording his own music, got his own pieces on. Other conductor's didn't do it. Koussevitzky didn't get the *Short Symphony* on records. [Carlos] Chavez did that.

No, I think I'm not the only one. Roy Harris, after the Third Symphony, did not have everything of his recorded either. I think Hanson and Harris were probably the greatest businessmen and self-promoters. They would get on a train and go to New York. Roy Harris lived practically with the Red Seal Victor company. That's how all his early music was recorded by them and Columbia, too.

Now, Howard Hanson got all of his works on Mercury Records, and they must have been fabulous engineers in that period, because it still sounds marvelous. I have a recording of Mitchell Miller playing the Vaughan Williams Oboe Concerto on a Mercury recording that came out at the same time. It sounds like the best of a compact disc. I can't imagine who that was at Mercury at that time, but Hanson must have known that it was somebody very expert, because all of his works sound very fine and the other pieces he did, too.

But other American composers, including myself, got short shrift. Piston had to wait patiently. I think at the time Koussevitzky was playing Piston, he got a short piece for organ and strings recorded with E. Power Biggs. I don't think any of the Symphonies ever made it with Koussevitzky. I think only with Münch did the Piston Symphonies begin to be recorded.

EY: Did Koussevitzky take a lot of liberties with your works which he played?

DD: No, definitely not. I would say Münch was a little more erratic than Koussevitzky was. I really had to beg Münch to stick to the *tempo*. Never did I have to say anything to Koussevitzky. He would say to me, "How was?" I said, "Marvelous." I was absolutely knocked out by it, especially what he did in the slow movement of the Second Symphony. I thought it was so beautiful. Now there he could have exaggerated enormously and stretched it out the way he did in Sibelius and Tchaikovsky, but he did not do it in my Symphony, so he must have had the good sense to know that that was not the right thing to do with my style of music.

I had a feeling he conducted my Symphony as he would have done a Bruckner Symphony, and he had conducted Bruckner. I think that is something that may have made him feel secure. He was a very good Bruckner conductor. I wish he had done more Bruckner. ♦

## KOUSSEVITZKY IN WRITING

Back in the 1930s, in *The Orchestra Speaks*, Bernard Shore, first violist of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, wrote about some of the conductors under whom he and the ensemble had played. One of these was Serge Koussevitzky.

Unfortunately, Shore's all-too-brief piece on Koussevitzky is one of the least satisfactory in his collection, too much of it being taken up with second-hand tales that may or may not be accurate and tales that may or may not be apocryphal. However, there are a few quick glimpses of Koussevitzky at rehearsal which give us a rather abbreviated look at the demands which he made upon himself and the orchestra.

Over the years, my dissatisfaction with Shore's book has grown each time I have picked it up. Yet, for a long time, I could not put my finger on the reason (or reasons) for this. Indeed, this might have continued to be the case had I not found the answer (or answers) in two other books. The first was Sir Adrian Boult's *My Own Trumpet* in which he, as music director and chief conductor of the BBC Orchestra, tells of Koussevitzky's appearances with the ensemble back in the time of Shore and of

Boult's own visit to the Boston Symphony after World War II, while Koussevitzky was still its music director. The second was *Cadenza* by Erich Leinsdorf (himself the music director of the BSO in succession to Koussevitzky and Münch), not so much for what Leinsdorf had to say about the Koussevitzky years in Boston, but rather for what he had to say about his experiences with the orchestras of London in the years after WWII.

In order to really comprehend Shore's likes and dislikes and, indeed, his attitude toward music and conductors, one should read Leinsdorf on the ability of British musicians in the post-WWII era to achieve so very quickly a high level of performance at a first rehearsal -- only to stay at that level and not rise much above it thereafter. Then read Boult on the contributions Albert Coates made toward improving British orchestral playing standards after WWI -- this latter point because it was still necessary for Willem Mengelberg in the 1930s to personally supervise the tuning of British orchestras on his visits to England, sometimes a very lengthy process necessitated by the something less than high orchestral standards of the time.



To see what Koussevitzky was after in his BBC rehearsals, after reading Shore one should read Boult on his reaction to his rehearsals in Boston. It then becomes clear not only how Koussevitzky worked, but why. He had made one of the world's greatest orchestras out of the Boston Symphony (after its disastrous post-WWI years when Pierre Monteux had kept the orchestra at as high a level as he could, given the problems that he faced). Yet Boult could conclude that his BBC Orchestra had many superior first chair men.

For all that Boult expressed satisfaction with his orchestra as compared with the BSO, the fact remains that, under Koussevitzky, the Boston Symphony was far and away the greater orchestra. (It is by no means certain that the BBC Orchestra was London's best, if one considers Sir Thomas Beecham's pre-WWII London Philharmonic and his post-WWII Royal Philharmonic as well as the post-WWII Legge-Karajan Philharmonia Orchestra.) That the Boston Symphony was a greater orchestra by far than the BBC Orchestra can be explained in the light of Boult's comments on the Boston first-chair men only if one keeps in mind Leinsdorf's characterization of British orchestral playing on the one hand and the demands made by Koussevitzky on every orchestra he conducted as characterized by Shore.

That Koussevitzky was successful in having orchestras other than his own meet his demands and rise to his standards can be seen in the following comment by Virgil Thomson: "Koussevitzky is better at balancing a string chord than anybody. He always was. When he came to Paris after the war [WWI], he could already do it, could do it with any pick-up orchestra."

Thomson's reviews and comments on the centenary season of the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra of New York in 1942 left little doubt that, in his judgement, Koussevitzky had achieved better overall results with that orchestra than any of the other guest conductors for that season (as well as its regular conductor, John Barbirolli), though it should be noted that in Thomson's view, Walter Damrosch "got the loveliest sound out of the Philharmonic I have ever heard anybody get."

Reading these several books one constantly finds it necessary to read between the lines or to go behind the lines, because the mere words of the authors do not always tell the full story. For example, there is the obvious preference of Shore for the work of Toscanini above all other conductors considered in his book. Yet the Toscanini rehearsals which Shore so admired benefited, if one refers back to what Shore wrote about Boult, from Boult's work with the orchestra on two of the major works which Toscanini was to conduct.

In his book, Boult makes a major point of the Toscanini concerts with the BBC Orchestra and virtually admits that he was in error in scheduling both Toscanini and Koussevitzky in the same season, as the British predi-

lection for Toscanini rather over-shadowed the Koussevitzky concerts -- to the annoyance, so Boult concluded, of the latter.

Yet for all the acclaim surrounding the Toscanini concerts, Boult does not mention Toscanini when he gets around to the great conductors he has heard (and one is rather dumbfounded to find Furtwängler listed among the greatest conductors of Beethoven whom Boult heard, when the great German conductor is not even mentioned elsewhere in the book). In Boult's report on the American orchestras which he heard or conducted in his first post-WWII trip to the United States, the NBC Orchestra came off as better than that of the Metropolitan Opera, but not nearly as fine as the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Boston Symphony, or the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra of New York, the last-named then under the direction of Artur Rodzinski.

To gain an idea of how and why Koussevitzky worked as he did, Boult's description of his rehearsals with the BSO gives us a real insight which, in turn, gives greater meaning to Shore's description of Koussevitzky in action, trying to get from an orchestra not his own the results he achieved in Boston. Wrote Boult:

The Boston Orchestra is a superb instrument. I have had great enjoyment from my three weeks' work with it. It has, however, several traits which are most disconcerting. Koussevitzky evidently treats them like children and insists on hearing everything in its final form at rehearsal, never trusting his players to act on a verbal hint. Even the concertmaster is unable to remember a thing he is told unless it is rehearsed, and although we played the Brahms Symphony six times, he never began his solo quietly enough, although I asked him four or five times. There is a general aversion to playing really quietly, unless the thing has been long prepared and/or long rehearsed, and a *diminuendo* needs a great deal of rehearsing always.

To compare them with our own orchestra, I think we may claim greater reading ability, greater range of tone, far greater musical perception and apprehension of the conductor's wishes, mastery of an enormously greater repertoire, and a much greater sensitivity to the sound that is being produced by the orchestra as a whole. Individually there are only two principals in the Boston Orchestra who could in any way be considered superior to their opposite numbers in London...

If one accepts Boult's views, then the ability of Koussevitzky in creating and maintaining in Boston one of the world's greatest orchestras emerges as all the greater an achievement. Then, too, it explains Koussevitzky's demands at rehearsals of the orchestras

*(Continued on Page 16)*

## BOOK REVIEWS

□ *Paris: The Musical Kaleidoscope, 1870-1925* by Elaine Brody. George Braziller, 1987. 360pp. \$19.95

Let's be frank. I did not find this book at all to my liking. I suppose that was due, at least in part, to its rather misleading title, for the text deals rather too much with the supposed interactions of the arts and concentrates rather too little on the world of music. But there is more to my dissatisfaction than that alone.

Almost thirty of the three hundred pages of text are wasted on the author's selection of *her* "masterpieces of French music" of the period covered by the book. Her selections are quite predictable and offer nothing new to the music lover who will have his or her own masterpieces in mind. In view of all the author omitted from her main text, certainly these pages could have been put to far better use.

The writing varies. There is rather too much of a smattering of culture approach as she tries to relate art and literature to the music of the times. Yet her year by year summary of the coming of the Russians to Paris with their music and dance is all too terse. The index is so incomplete as to be worthless, and the omissions in the text are legion. She tends to give very short-shrift to performing musicians in general and all but ignores some of the more important of them altogether.

Vladimir Golschmann rates a single mention, not for his famous concerts of modern music, but only as the conductor of Gershwin's Piano Concerto. Serge Koussevitzky does not even rate a mention for his work in Paris, although Virgil Thomson in his letters of the period and in his writings both then and later makes clear that Koussevitzky's concerts were among the most interesting of the time and featured the finest orchestral playing in Paris. Indeed, it was Koussevitzky's work in Paris (and some will add, Thomson's letters and writings) which paved the conductor's way to Boston.

Roger Desormiere and Manuel Rosenthal are virtually ignored, as is Helene Jourdan-Morhange, the violinist who was a very close personal friend of Ravel and faithful interpreter of his work. Overlooked, too, are the pianists Marguerite Long and Marcelle Meyer as well as Ernest Ansermet. While Pierre Monteux rates a mention or two, you will not find his name in the index.

What is there to recommend this book? Simply this: it can serve, for those who can stick to it (which is not an easy task), as a starting point for a look at music in Paris around the turn of the century. There is a huge bibliography which can serve as a source for those who want to go further and take a real look at the city and its music. But here, too, there is a problem. The bibliography is so extensive and so replete with books of only extremely peripheral import that it is difficult to weed out the

items which should be read (such as those by James Harding, Rollo Myers, Marguerite Long, Virgil Thomson, Charles Koechlin, Fokine, Grigoriev and Vuillermoz) to learn about musical Paris.

And so, we have a book which fills no niche and serves no real purpose, a volume which can serve at the very best only as an introduction to musical Paris -- but even there, an introduction over-balanced toward the related arts and very weak on music itself.

□ *Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson* edited by Tim Page and Vanessa Weeks Page. Summit Books, 1988. 413pp. \$24.95

This is hardly the first book one should read by or about Virgil Thomson, but those who know the author through his writings, reviews, autobiography, biography or music will certainly find this collection of interest as supplemental reading.

That said, the volume shows all the faults which too often pervade collections of letters. The editors have made their selections, but one wonders what they used as criteria. There are far too many bits of trivia which I am quite sure they included for human interest, but which serve only to take up space which could have been far better used. There are no responses to many of the letters which cry out for them or for, at the very least, an editorial comment. Did Thomson get his watch back from the Hamilton Watch Company? I will never know, because the Pages did not tell me so.

Usually, collections of letters drive a reader wild with name after name which must be identified. That does not seem to be nearly as much of a problem with this volume, but only because the identifications are rather minimal or questionable, e.g. "Nathan Milstein, Soviet Violinist" or "Bruno Walter, Austrian Conductor."

By far the most interesting section, at least to this reader, was that devoted to Thomson's replies to readers who had taken issue with his reviews and writings during his years with the New York Herald-Tribune. But in rather too many instances the letters would be better read in conjunction with Thomson's original pieces, which are missing here. Still, Thomson's way with angry readers is a model of its sort -- in contrast to the angry, vituperative replies some critics used to find fashionable.

Elsewhere in this collection there are points of interest. In his letters from France during the 20s and 30s, Thomson tells us more about music in Paris than does Elaine Brody in her *Paris*: "Heard some good music but not too much, though. Paris orchestras bad. Programs good. *Concerts Koussevitzky* a glaring exception to the bad

playing. *Horace victorieux* of Honegger thrilling. Heard two great operas: *The Trojans* of Berlioz and *Boris Godunov*. Real musical event was *Pierrot lunaire* of Schoenberg for semi-speaking, semi-singing voice and small orchestra. Fascinating concurrence of noises." (4/21/22)

Thomson's views on the performance of his own music stand in stark contrast to the sanctity of the score so beloved by so many composers and musicians:

A *pp* snare-drum-roll before the...intermezzo is no invention of mine. Some conductor may have needed a bit of activity there to help fill up an empty spot. If you feel the same, don't hesitate to use it.

As for the shortened version...I am not sure that all this interior cutting has helped. In case of a real first-class production, a choice about it could be left to the conductor...

It all sounded to me a little slow, as if you had observed punctiliously my metronome markings, which are themselves a little on the slow side...The tempos...seem to me almost everywhere a bit slow. This is my fault...Having never heard it before, except when conducting it myself, I had not realized that I had underestimated everywhere the speeds required. (This last was from a letter to Leopold Stokowski, no less!)

To conclude this thoroughly ambiguous review on a still further note of ambiguity, my wife found Thomson's cooking recipes of considerable interest while it seemed to this reader that entirely too many letters dealt with money, as if Thomson were a money grubber, like Stravinsky.

Kenneth DeKay, © 1988

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## COMPACT KOUSSEVITZKY

In Japan, where the work of the great symphony conductors of the first half of the century still thrives, the first compact disc containing the recordings of Serge Koussevitzky was issued last fall. The disc, RCA ORG 1005, includes two of the Russian's greatest performances: the 1950 Sibelius Symphony #2 and the Moussorgsky/Ravel *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Our thanks to one of our newest members, Yoshihiro Adachi of Nagoya, Japan, for providing us with a copy of this disc.

I had sincerely hoped that the first Koussevitzky CD would be earth-shattering. Alas, this disc could be more appropriately described as "ear-shattering." Both recordings sound as though the transfers were produced by a well-meaning individual who, unfortunately, has never heard a symphony orchestra in actual concert.

Throughout the disc the equalization is most unnatural. The high frequencies in the Sibelius have been made so artificially bright that the *ff* brass passages are nearly always on the verge of distortion. This brightening of the highs also accounts for the annoyingly high level of hiss which can be heard constantly. For all its faults, my 1970 RCA Victrola LP (my very first Koussevitzky recording) is infinitely better. While the Victrola sound was a bit on the muddy side, it was neither as harsh nor as unpleasant as the new CD. Hiss on the Victrola issue was barely noticeable.

To make matters worse (indeed, much worse) someone has decided to tamper with the volume knobs during the transfer process. If anything, this version of the Sibelius Symphony could have used an expanded dynamic range, but RCA's engineers have further compressed the already limited range from softest to loudest passages. What could they have been thinking? A CD is fully

capable of reproducing a far greater dynamic range than an early tape. Note especially the timpani strokes just before the start of the third movement's trio section. Each is slightly louder than the last (they should all sound identical, as they do on the LP) and the hiss level increases with every stroke -- just as if someone were cranking up the volume after each note.

The transfer of *Pictures* suffers from one of the noisiest 78 sets that I have ever heard on a commercial reissue. Truly, this is better than RCA's last transfer of this recording. That one (which I heard on a French RCA LP, #731025, pressed on self-destructing vinyl) sounded like it was being played over a telephone. While the CD represents a substantial improvement over that version, the orchestral sound here is again unnatural and overly bright. Couple that with scratchy, swishy, rumbling 78s, and the result is miserable. Although this recording was made in 1930, the sound on the original 78s was much better, clearer and more realistic than what may be heard here.

This is far from RCA's worst historic CD reissue. That unfortunate fate was reserved for Rachmaninov's recording of his own Second Piano Concerto. Nonetheless, these are two of Koussevitzky's most stunning interpretations, and thus represent two of the finest recordings ever made. Only Koussevitzky's 1935 version of the Sibelius is more compelling. RCA could and should have taken more care with these examples of Koussevitzky's art. I sincerely hope that they remaster both performances (as they eventually did with the aforementioned Rachmaninov CD) before they issue this disc in the United States.

Tom Godell

In the preceding issue of our newsletter, we began a bibliography of books containing significant information about Koussevitzky and invited additional information from our members. With the help of several members, we hereby present the following list:

Boult, Sir Adrian Cedric. *My Own Trumpet*. 213pp. London: H. Hamilton, 1973.

Brook, Donald. *International Gallery of Conductors*. 232pp. London: Rockliff, 1951.

Brower, Harriette. *World's Great Men of Music*. 400pp. Frederick A. Stokes, 1922; reprint ed., 1940.

Brush, George. *Boston Symphony Orchestra*. 219pp. Boston: Merrymount Press, 1936.

Copland, Aaron. *Copland on Music*. 285pp. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960.

Downes, Olin. *Olin Downes on Music*. 473pp. New York: Simon & Shuster, 1957.

Duke, Vernon. *Passport to Paris*. 502pp. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1955.

Ewen, David. *Dictators of the Baton*. 305pp. Chicago: Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., 1943.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Man with the Baton*. Introduction to original edition by Serge Koussevitzky. 374pp. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1936.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Music Comes to America*. 295pp. New York: Allen, Towne & Heath, Inc., 1947.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Musicians Since 1900*. 974pp. New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1978.

Gaisberg, Fred W. *Music on Record*. 269pp. London: R. Hale, 1946.

Leinsdorf, Erich. *Cadenza: A Musical Career*. 321pp. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Composer's Advocate*. 216pp. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

Lyman, David. *Great Jews in Music*. 326pp. Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 1982.

Newman, Vera. *Ernest Newman, A Memoir*. 278pp. New York: Knopf, 1964.

O'Connell, Charles. *The Other Side of the Record*. 332pp. New York: Knopf, 1947.

Piatigorsky, Gregor. *Cellist*. 273pp. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965.

Pincherle, Marc. *The World of the Virtuoso*. 192pp. New York: Norton, 1963.

Ries, Claire R. *Composers, Conductors and Critics*. 264pp. New York: Oxford University Press, 1955.

Saleski, Gdal. *Famous Musicians of Jewish Origin*. 716pp. New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1949.

Schickel, Richard. *The World of Carnegie Hall*. 438pp. New York: Julian Messner, Inc., 1960.

Shore, Bernard. *The Orchestra Speaks*. 217pp. London: Longmans, Green & Co., Ltd., 1938.

Slonimsky, Nicolas. *Perfect Pitch: A Life Story*. 292pp. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Szigeti, Joseph. *With Strings Attached*. 341pp. New York: Knopf, 1947.

Thomson, Virgil. *Music Right and Left*. 214pp. New York: Holt, 1951.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Musical Scene*. 301pp. New York: Knopf, 1945.

Thanks to all those who contributed to the above list: Kenneth DeKay, David H. Radcliffe, Phillip G. Moores, Dr. Phillip Kass and Langdon Lombard. In our next installment, we'll present a listing of magazine articles devoted to Koussevitzky.

Photographs courtesy of Edward D. Young

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he conducted. For Koussevitzky to have taken what Boult obviously feels to be lesser material and have created with it a far greater orchestra than that of the BBC, gives some indication of just how great a conductor Serge Koussevitzky really was.

In conclusion, one can find few better summaries of the

greatness of Koussevitzky than the comments of Leinsdorf in *The Composer's Advocate* on the ability of Koussevitzky "to make music" and of Virgil Thomson in *Music Right and Left* on Koussevitzky not only as conductor, but also as the developer of Tanglewood. There is no need to quote their views as they should be read in full.

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