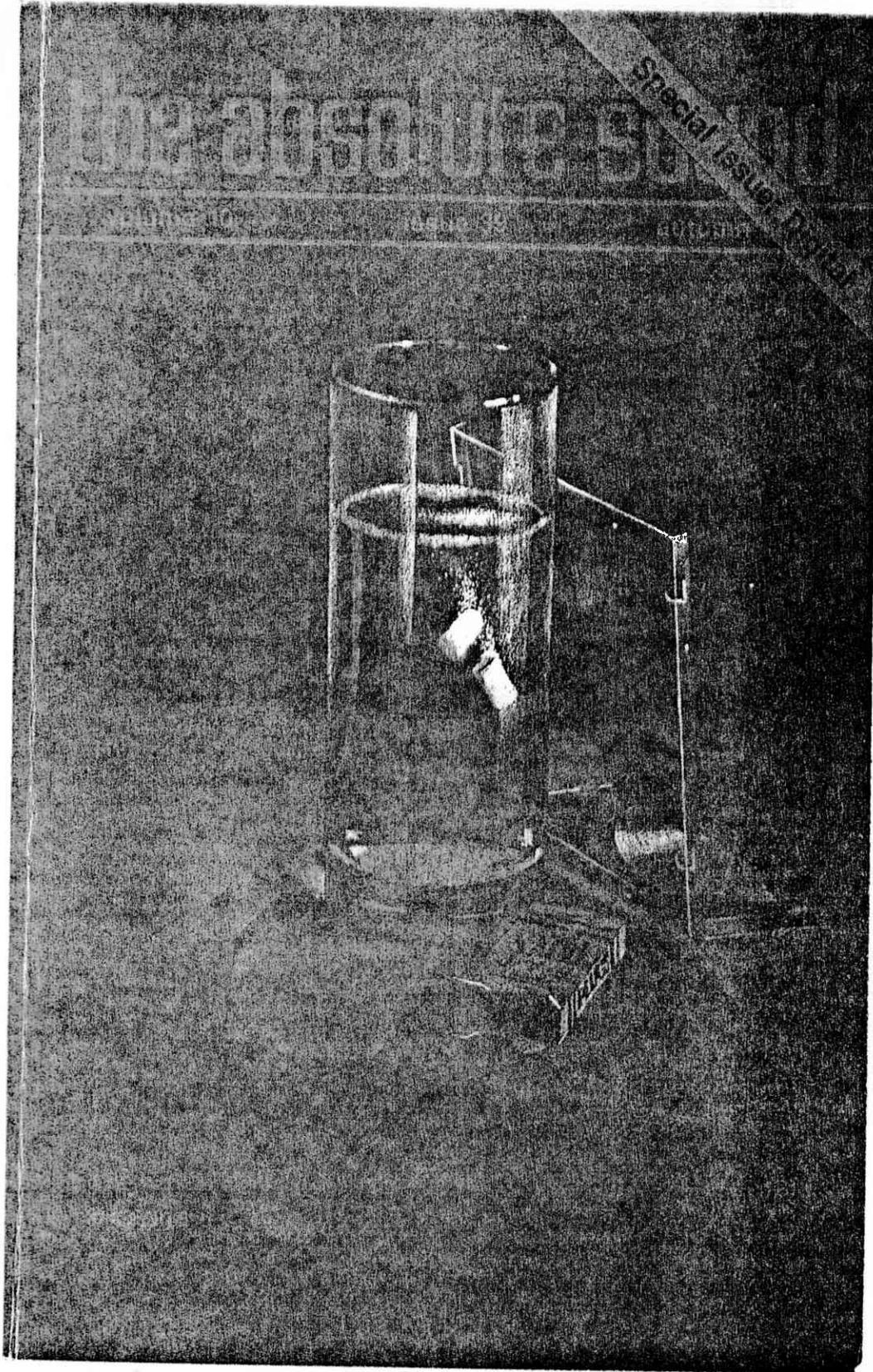


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Special Issue: Review

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The London/Decca Phase Four Recordings

The full title of the label evolved into "Phase Four + I.M. 20 C.R." which stood for the "fourth phase" of stereo development and Individually Monitored 20 Channel Recording. I will deal, in a later article, with the "fourth phase" of stereo,¹ but I want to take a look at some of the technology behind that phase, the I.M. 20 C.R. part of the title.¹

For the first batch of 13 releases in 1962 (12 original albums and one "best of" collection) on the Phase Four label Decca used a custom-built 10-channel mixing board. The second group of nine albums released in 1963 brought Phase Four into its full I.M. 20 C.R. glory.

In addition to Decca's own designed and built FR-IA and FR-IB microphones, the cornucopia of microphones used included Neumann M-50, Neumann M-49, Neumann KM56, Neumann KM-53, Telefunken 251, AKGC-12. Each of the 20 channels had its own preamp, a Decca built limiter, Cinema equalizer (variable by ± 8 dB), and also echo (with a choice of either electronic or chamber reverberation). From the mixing board, the signal was fed into a four-track Ampex tape recorder from which the signal was finally balanced onto the two-track master tape on a Decca-built EMI TR-90 recorder. The records were mastered using a Teldec cutting head with Decca-built amplifier and a Neumann lathe.

It's not surprising that, with all this hardware lying about, Decca's publicity was optimistic, declaring that both forward and backward stereo soundstages were created. Clearly a great deal was created in terms of imaging, presence, transient response, and creative use of the soundstage, especially its lateral configuration, but the depth of the soundstage was often sacrificed—though, as we shall see, not always.

That the the Phase Four engineers captured so much dramatic sound, and that they so often used the medium so creatively—despite the miles of connection-bestrewn cable between microphone and cutting head—is a reflection of the skills of Arthur Bannister and Arthur Lilley.

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STRAUSS: *Don Juan; Till Eulenspiegel*. Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Henry Lewis (cond.). [Tony D'Amato and Gavin Barrett (producers); Arthur Lilley (eng.). Recorded in Kingsway Hall, London.] Phase Four PFS 4215.

In terms of impact, presence, transient response, and sheer gutsy, raspy sound, this issue from June 1971 is marvelous. But, to balance the ledger, there is a flatish soundstage and a lack of dimensionality.

The orchestra is drawn out in a line from extreme left to extreme right with great precision of imaging and exceptional clarity of inner voices. The impact of rich brass thumping out of the right-hand speaker, riding over rasping bass and lush cellos is considerable. Yet it is those very cellos that suggest a lack of sonic cohesion and an unrealistic spacing of the instrumental groups.

In the performances, there are some beguiling touches, such as the lovely oboe and clarinet solos throughout and a marvelously physical realization of Till's death. Despite the relatively slow tempo for *Don Juan*, I found the performance impassioned and full-blooded.

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Candler by Candlelight. The Magic Strings, Norman Candler (cond.). [No producer or engineer listed]. Phase Four PFS 4360.

After the initial appearance of the Phase Four records produced in the UK, other branches of the Decca European empire wanted to get in the act and this recording is one of the consequences. This was a Telefunken production and is one of the later Phase Four releases, issued in March 1976, in which a selection of popular favorites—"Petite Fleur", "Spanish Harlem"—are played by 80 strings, synthesizer, harpsichord, harp, flute, and rhythm section.

Now, Phase Four went in for pseudonyms and there is reason to suspect that "Norman Candler" ("this young Austrian composer/arranger/conductor," says the sleeve note) is one of these. As for the "magic strings," it would not be unusual to find players from one of Germany's foremost orchestras forming the basis of this studio group. Certainly the lush string sound is all about killing you softly with a studio-full of cellos.

* It was multi-miking.

¹ One of my future discussions in this series will be to unmask Botticelli, Chris Waxman, Tutti's Trombones, and many more. I will also explore the Phase Four philosophy, how the Phase Four name came about; recording venues; interviews with Arthur Bannister.

The soundstage is of room-filling width, with tremendous solidity and body, though there is no great depth to the swath of massed strings. The solo flute is also as wide as my listening room. The total sound has enormous presence.

"Norman Candler" arranged the numbers, swirling washes of strings and synthesizer around a harp, whose plucked notes stride across the back of the stage. Or so it sounds.

Laughable? Perhaps. But this recording is also, in some perverse way, a stunning example of the virtuosity of engineering knob-twiddling—I mean, just listen to the crystalline, interwoven sounds at the start of "The Way We Were".

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OFFENBACH: *Gaite Parisienne*. New Philharmonia Orchestra, Charles Munch (cond.). [Tony D'Amato (prod.); Arthur Lilley (eng.)] Phase Four PFS 4096.

At the time of its release, in September 1966, R.D. Darrell described, in *High Fidelity*, the sound of this recording as "dramatically a spellbinder" and Munch's performance as "electrifyingly vital". I cannot improve on these epithets, though I can flesh out some of the detail.

This whole production exhibits tremendous energy, of both sound and musical performance. The first note is irresistible and this sets my feet a-tapping and ears ablazing with pleasure from there onward.

The imaging, within the wide soundfield, is extraordinary, with the woodwinds far over to the left, the brass far over to the right, and the horns plumb center. The body of strings is notably dimensional and the transients are searing.

All is right, so the sound is also slightly grainy with a hint (but only a hint) of raucousness and of congestion at the highest dynamic levels. On the other hand, few recordings have ever captured a trombone and piccolo exchange with such glorious immediacy.

Munch leads two full sides of Offenbach's infectious music with a sway and a swagger that will pin you back in your chair. A sonic spectacular, indeed. Sheer exuberance carries all before it. As Darrell said, "elegant stylistically and galvanic rhythmically...likely to draw blood from tender ears."*

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Capriccio! TCHAIKOVSKY: *Capriccio Italien*. RIMSKY-KORSAKOV: *Capriccio Espagnol*. London Festival Orchestra, Stanley Black (cond.) [Tony D'Amato (prod.); Arthur Lilley (eng.)] Decca Phase Four PFS 4055.

Although these are carefully crafted and leisurely (rather than fiery) readings, they are nonetheless extremely musical interpretations, hugely enjoyable and superbly played.

The London Festival Orchestra may have been an ad-hoc studio band; but it was also one of the finest ensembles to be heard in London at the time, since it was made up of many top players from established London orchestras. So, it is not surprising that the playing on this album is sumptuous, with a gloriously natural-sounding French horn, rich strings (especially the lower strings), and an excellent precision of ensemble.

Sonically, this record is equal to the orchestral playing, with the Phase Four soundstage, for once, as deep as it is wide and conveying a real sense of the back of the stage. The dimensionality of the strings, in particular, is excellent. There is a sense of a full body of players; every strand of the music is clean, clear, and precisely located. The solo violin is nicely placed and alive in the Rimsky-Korsakov. Transients are fast and crisp. The sound has impact and presence.

This is an early Decca attempt at applying the Phase Four recording philosophy to classical music; as such, it is a remarkable achievement.

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Beyond the Sea. Frank Chacksfield and his Orchestra with un-named female vocalist. [Tony D'Amato (prod.); Arthur Lilley (eng.)] Decca Phase Four PFS 4053.

Phase Four engineer Arthur Bannister recently made the interesting point that, once the series got underway, arrangers began to see the potential of the stereo medium and to keep the sonics in mind from the very start.

I suspect that this may have been the case with Roland Shaw's arrangements of many an old favorite for this (January 1965) release. This is a theme album if ever there was one: "How Deep is the Ocean", "Deep River", "Moon River", and so on.

* This is a recommendation?

The people at Phase Four loved these theme albums because they were able to use background, atmospheric sounds to link the music—here the sea breaks on a pebble beach as gulls wheel overhead.

This is an electronically—conceived album. The solo instruments are focused sharply in the front line and placed against a cushion of harmonizing strings.

The use of multi-tracked stereo comes into its own as effects like those pizzicato strings sweeping across the soundstage at the start of "Sleepy Lagoon" and that marvelously effective opening of *Victory at Sea* in which a brass and timpani battle is contrasted with gutty cellos and bass strings.

I must admit that this is a musically unexceptional album, but there are some lovely moments, like the plangent oboe in "Ebb Tide" and, as so usual for Phase Four, a beautifully captured harp throughout. There are also moments which are not so lovely, such as the 40-foot-wide, recessed and reverberant harmonica during "Shenandoah".

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The Romantic Pianos of Ronnie Aldrich. [Hugh Mendl & Mark White (producers); Arthur Bannister (eng.)] Decca Phase Four PFS 4039.

This is not the most sophisticated nor the most dazzling piano playing you will hear, nor does it contain the most innovative melodic lines or chordal variations. The album consists of easy-listening arrangements (probably by Aldrich himself) of standard songs. The real interest in this issue (of June 1964), as it was with most of Aldrich's recordings, lies in the use of *multi-tracked* piano. (Yes.) Thus Aldrich trades keyboard phrases with himself across the width of the loudspeakers; and in terms of impact, the *sound* is quite stunning.* Mine is a second-hand copy, so perhaps the ravages of a past life have given a slightly brittle edge to the piano. Otherwise every piano note has the resonant impact of a full orchestra.

The orchestra itself is also there behind the pianos making sumptuous and semi-exotic sounds. Only a lone drummer in the right-side of the studio sounds forlornly out of place.

At its best, a track like "I have Dreamed" is reminiscent, in its arrangement, of the orchestral sound Jamy Goldsmith created for *The Sand Pebbles*. Even at its worst there is always the solid piano to admire as each note bounces out of the soundstage toward you like some large missile.

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PROKOFIEV: *Peter and the Wolf*. BRITTEN: *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Antal Dorati (cond.), Sean Connery (narrator). [Tony D'Amato (prod.); Arthur Lilley and Arthur Bannister (engineers.)] Decca Phase Four PFS 4104.

In many ways, these works were tailor-made for the multi-tracked Phase Four recording technique. This recording team grabbed the opportunity and with all hands. Add to the sound quality the convincing narration of Connery and the first-rate conducting of Dorati and we have here a recording of considerable merit.

This is a splashy and colorful—and dramatic—presentation of Prokofiev's score. Dorati screws up the musical tension with conviction, particularly when the wolf appears.

The Phase Four engineers also make the most of the featured soloists. So clarinet, flute, bassoon, and horns are electronically arrayed in front of the orchestra, much in the manner of vocal soloists, though not as obtrusive. This technique works surprisingly well. There is no confusion between, say, the flute as soloist representing the bird and the flute as orchestral player within the overall texture.

The performance of Britten's *Guide* is also successful and it contains fewer tricks. Again the highlighting of individual instruments and sections works well within the context of the music and Dorati whips up the tension during the final fugue to great effect.

The impact of the sound is tremendous, with solid images and transients that snap out. The frequency range encompasses the double bass and violins with ease and the dynamic range captures the gentlest of sounds as well as the whole orchestra in full cry, without a hint of congestion.

Drawbacks? Connery's voice is obtrusive in a different, close-up, acoustic. The bass drum and cymbal (in the Britten) have nothing like the impact they should have in dynamics or harmonic richness. (Perhaps these were recorded in the bass-shy Decca Studio 3?)

—Ifan Payne

*As, no doubt, it would be.