

the absolute sound[®]

\$7.00

volume 11

issue 44

november/december 1986

©RCA 1986



DECCA/LONDON PHASE FOUR RECORDINGS - PART V Decoding the Inner Groove Information

reading is not as delicate nor as subtle as the Paray, but it has that quality, hard-to-describe but easy enough to discern, that makes Saint-Saens sound French, rather than Wagnerian. (For those who are interested, Dutoit, whom one might think the ideal modern-day interpreter, falls apart completely, playing the piece as if bored, as if it were beneath him. The digital sound, I believe, contributes to a certain patchwork-like effect.) The Fremaux recording has a sensational 16-Hertz note during the slow movement that can make the room walls bend outward and pants legs flap in the wave's wake. Get the original Studio Two EMI if you can; it's better.

But it is the Paray/Dupre that is the most satisfying of all, musically. The sound, considering the dryness, isn't all that bad. It has the effect of underscoring the chamber-like writing during many sections, particularly effective in the Third Movement, where the stereophonic back-and-forths are just right—even thrilling. The organ-orchestra balance is near-perfect here (which it isn't on the others). The Paray/Dupre interpretation stresses the structure of the piece and—surprise—the *Organ Symphony* comes out as a witty, wry, and highly melodic invention.

The organ is particularly spectacular here. Don't ask me why, but there is something about the Edsel Ford acoustic that does justice to Dupre's sound. I don't miss the long reverb times of a church or a Symphony Hall at all; in fact, I think the score benefits because its architecture (and there is considerable there) is more clearly heard. Certainly it is in this interpretation, and to a degree that only Toscanini had achieved before. Unfortunately, the Toscanini was a studio job with an electronic organ (that is barely audible) and in somewhat faded mono, at that.

I consider this one of the most successful of the Mercury recordings. But do not get the re-issue (on one of their later 60-minute Great Music discs; the sound was ruined). There is also an excellent four-track issue of this (mine was destroyed in the fire) which is worth the search, if you can find one still in good condition. In case you happen to favor the Munch interpretation (it was released contemporaneously with the Paray and the debate has raged since), you will find me stuffed with pigeon feathers and not to be trusted. Just thought I'd warn you. Coooo.



ROZSA: *Ben Hur*. National Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus, Miklos Rozsa (cond.). [Raymond Few and Tim McDonald (producers); Stan Goodall (eng.)] PFS 4394/SPC 21166.

Stan Goodall was one of the cutting engineers for Phase Four records, though he did not, in fact, cut this record which he engineered—Harry Fisher did that. Goodall, by the way, is still an engineer with Decca (sorry—Polygram) at its recording studios in Hampstead, north London.

How can we tell that Harry Fisher cut this disc? Well, since *Ben Hur* is a well-known Phase Four recording, this is as good a place as any to look in greater detail at the sort of information that is available on these discs.

The central area of vinyl surrounding the record label contains three major sets of markings. Directly below the label at 6 o'clock is the matrix number and mastering information. On the right hand side of the label, at 3 o'clock, is engraved the code for the number of the stamper used to press the disc. To take the matrix sequence first: This is stamped onto the disc in the area of vinyl between the inside grooves and the record label and is usually found directly below the label, that is, at 6 o'clock as you look at the label the right way up. The sequence of letters and numbers is divided into three sections (but actually contains four bits of information) separated by hyphens, as, for example, on this *Ben Hur* album:

ZAL-14763-1W

However many copies of a recording are actually pressed and sold to the public, the first two pieces of information are consistent for each release. There is no need to peer at the vinyl for these since they are clearly printed on the right hand side of the label directly above the record catalogue number. So, for example, this Rozsa disc has the first two parts of the matrix number, ZAL-14763, printed on the label on Side One. Side Two has the next number in the sequence, ZAL-14764.

To take each part of the matrix number in turn: The prefix, ZAL, indicates the format

of the disc and the origin of the recording. The following prefixes were used by Decca:

AL—12-inch 78 rpm mono
ARL—12-inch 33.3 rpm mono
ZAL—12-inch 33.3 rpm stereo
DR—10-inch 78 rpm mono
DRL—10-inch 33.3 rpm mono
ZDR—10-inch 33.3 rpm stereo

An X before the prefix letters indicates that the recording was made eXternal to another company but specifically for Decca (often the tapes remained the property of that external recording company).

For example, XZAL-15007 is *Larcange et Trenet* (PFS 4403), a 12-inch stereo 33.3 disc made by French Decca (but using a London-based recording team) on order from Decca in London.

Other prefixes, e.g., STE, indicate that the record was made by the London-based Decca company for one of its foreign subsidiaries and the matrix number used is the relevant number used by that foreign company. For example, D.014.723 is *toberfest!* (PFS 4194), made by the U.S. London-based recording team for the London Decca subsidiary.

Back to *Ben Hur*. The matrix prefix ZAL-14763 indicates that it is a London-based Decca 12-inch 33.3 rpm stereo record.

The second part of the number—14763—is the actual number of the matrix assigned in sequence to all Decca matrixes. This first Phase Four recording, Ronnie Aldrich's *Melody and Percussion* (PFS 341/SPC44007) has the matrix number 5135 on Side One and 5135 on Side Two. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the last matrix number allotted to a Phase Four recording was, co-incidentally, also for a Ronnie Aldrich album, *Emotions*, issued in 1964 with the matrix number 15830 on Side One and 15831 on Side Two.

The third part of the matrix numbering sequence is the suffix number immediately following the second hyphen. Thus on Side One of the *Ben Hur* album, ZAL-14763-1 is the suffix 1W. The W we will explore in a moment. Here the 1 is what counts. This is the number of the master acetate, cut from the master tape, that was sent to the fac-

for the whole processing sequence (sputtering, etc.) of which the stampers were the final product. On Side Two the matrix number is ZAL-14764-2W, indicating (by the 2) that a second acetate was required from which the stamper for this side was made.

Decca had two processing and pressing plants. One in New Malden, Surrey, in southern England, where all the Phase Four discs were pressed, and the other at Holton Heath in Dorset, which, mainly, pressed singles. The New Malden plant had more than 60 pressing machines, some automated, but most were manual. The plant was closed down at the time Decca sold off its recording studios and in the late 1970s became part of the Polygram empire.

As I reported in a previous article, almost all Phase Four releases, whether labels with PFS or SP(C) i.e., American London numbers, were pressed in this factory.

The fourth part of the matrix sequence is the final letter; in this case it is "W". This is the code that indicates the name of the mastering engineer who cut the acetate. The following codes, relevant to Phase Four, were used by Decca:

E is Stan Goodall
F is Cyril Windebank
G is Ted Burkett
K is Tony Hawkins
L is George Bettys
V is Quentin Williams
W is Harry Fisher

So this is how we can tell that Harry Fisher was the engineer who cut that fine fanfare which opens *Ben Hur*.

The second group of marks etched into the vinyl are the letters, or more usually a single letter, on the right of the label, at 3 o'clock. This indicates the number of the stamper used for pressing the particular side of the album.

A code word was used to indicate that number: BUCKINGHAM. Thus, the first stamper used was labeled "B" and after that wore out, or if other pressing machines were being used, the next letter, "U", indicated the second stamper, and so on. By using the word "BUCKINGHAM" the company could indicate ten stampers, after which it started doubling the letters, thus "BB" was stamper number 11; "BU" was 12, and so on.

On Side One of the *Ben Hur* in my possession, the stamper indication at 3 o'clock is "C" indicating that the pressing machine was using the third stamper. On Side Two, the letters are "BI" indicating that by then the pressing machine was using the fifteenth stamper.

I know that the opening fanfare on this *Ben Hur* release has been highly thought of, and although I agree that it is indeed a powerful experience, I find the rest of the album is sonically a bit flatter and less interesting than many of the Phase Four recordings. I suspect that my reactions may be influenced to some extent by the fact that I find most of the music to be sub-Respighian and less than inspiring. Also, after repeated listening, I have the impression that the upper strings seem to be somehow pushing hard to make their full effect. No transparency, is what it is. There is a lack of cohesive depth and ambience. The giveaway, really, is the self-effacing harp during "Arrius' Party" which has none of the splendor of the usual Lilley-engineered harp sound.

TCHAIKOVSKY: *Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-Flat Minor*. STRAVINSKY: *Petrushka; Three Movements*. Ilana Vered (piano); London Symphony Orchestra, Kazimierz Kord (cond.). [Tony D'Amato (prod.); Arthur Lilley (eng.).] PFS 4362/SPC 21148.

When Ilana Vered performed in concerts in London at the time of this recording (released March 1976), she was hailed as perhaps the finest woman pianist in the world. One of her strengths in the concert hall was her tremendous dynamics, but I am told that, when the red light went on in the recording studio, she became more reticent. Thus, I understand, considerable editing work was needed on the tapes so that the desirable cohesion of the performance was achieved.

So it is perhaps surprising that, after so much post-recording work, the published result contains plenty of character and spirit in this performance of the Tchaikovsky concerto. Aided by the then 46-year old Silesian Kazimierz Kord, Vered presents a large-scaled first movement, nicely balanced by a relaxed and attractive Andantino. The third movement is very much a swirling Allegro but with a fluency and rubato that at times contain more than a suggestion of J. Strauss. The final tempestuous sprint brings the work to a thrilling close.

Vered also plays "Russian Dance", "In Petrushka's House", and "Shrovetide Fair" from *Petrushka* with equal flair and sensitivity. So, musically, this is a most interesting disc.

Sonically, matters are less happy. Recorded in Kingsway Hall, the piano is large-scaled and closely recorded, as are the violins in the first movement. So much so that it is difficult to hear any detail through the huge wave of violin and piano sound until it all quiets down and one realizes that there are other instruments in the hall. The softer Andantino is thus beautifully recorded with plenty of ambience; but once the dynamics pick up again, the sound becomes overmodulated and blary with the tonal balance heavily favoring the upper low frequencies.

Love: Ronnie Aldrich and his two Pianos with the London Festival Orchestra. [Tony D'Amato (prod.); Arthur Bannister (eng.).] PFS 4361/SP44253.

Arthur Bannister's trade marks are to the

—Ifan Payne

Chesky Records: The Remastering of a Classic Recording

RACHMANINOFF: *Piano Concerto No. 2*. Earl Wild (piano), Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Horenstein (cond.). [Charles Gerhardt (prod.); Kenneth Wilkinson (eng.).] Chesky CR 2.

David Chesky is a composer, pianist, audiophile, and music lover. In pursuit of his powerful interest in music and sound, he and his brother Norman have formed their own record company designed to re-issue sonic classics of the past. Present plans center on recordings engineered by Kenneth Wilkinson, which originated in the highly regarded Readers Digest Series of the Sixties. Many of these are sonic and musical masterpieces that never reached the general public in decent pressings and are now impossible to find. Future releases include the rest of the Wild/Horenstein/Rachmaninoff cycle, Reiner's Brahms *Fourth Symphony*, Munch's *Francesca da Rimini* and Bizet *Symphony in C*, and Barbirolli's glorious version of the Sibellus *Second Symphony*. And more.

Kenneth Wilkinson, my favorite recording engineer, bar none, requires no introduction in this magazine. Charles Gerhardt is best known as the conductor of film music—specifically in the Wilkinson-engineered RCA Classic Film Score Series. He is an extremely versatile but underrated conductor and musi-

fore here. Every instrumental thread is clear and well-balanced and the imaging is of exceptional clarity. Of course, this is very much a multi-mike job; indeed, Ronnie Aldrich is, of necessity, tracked in order to get him playing a duet with himself from the extremes of left and right. The balance deliberately varies from song to song, but each number is beautifully done.

No need to doubt either the impact or presence of the recording; both are exemplary. In terms of sound quality, this is a stunner all round.

The chimes at the end of "Love" are beautifully captured and there is an equally fine throaty, moody flute at the start of "Quiet Nights". Each track has its own distinctive sonic touch.

My one complaint has to do with the lack of variety of rhythm and tempo from track to track. This particular lover wishes there were more. Variety, that is.

cian whose talents extend far beyond film music. He is also probably the most instinctively musical of all record producers. This team has compiled a vast array of memorable sounding recordings. The Cheskys' efforts are, therefore, of major importance. Any serious music lover owes them a debt of gratitude and the strongest possible support.

It would be hard to imagine a better collaboration than Wild and Horenstein playing Rachmaninoff. They do not dawdle or sentimentalize. The music flows crisply and powerfully. This primarily grows out of Wild's first-hand knowledge of Rachmaninoff's interpretive approach to his own music. The composer played his piano music much more briskly than what has become today's overly romanticized custom. For me, Wild and Horenstein's approach is very nearly perfect. Only in the final lyrical climax of the Second Movement do I miss more expansiveness.

I have recently heard the compact disc version of the highly touted Ashkenazy/Haitink/Rachmaninoff *Second Piano Concerto* (London 414475-2). The dull and dreary-smear sound is shocking in comparison to the Chesky recording. Wilkinson's usual wide-open airiness and hall ambience are actually jarring after hearing the compressed void of digitals toxicity.

The sound on this Chesky record is stunning. The piano is tonally accurate. It is recorded quite closely but remains well-integrated