

RECORDS: IMPACT OF THE PRICE CUTS

By HAROLD C. SCHONBERG
 IT is much too soon to assess the situation precipitated by Victor about two weeks ago when it drastically reduced the price of its classical LP disks. Some retailers and record companies are acting as though the world has come to an end. It hasn't. Some consumers are acting as though the millennium has arrived. It hasn't.

As a snap judgment, this department would say that the public will benefit. It seems highly unlikely that the large companies will cut corners in manufacturing procedures, as far as LP disks themselves are concerned. The field is too competitive. It may be that some of the marginal companies will be driven to the wall, and that will be unfortunate. But more records will be sold than ever before, new buyers for classical music will come into the fold, and it may even be that "list prices," up to now almost a myth, will become stabilized.

Probably all companies—in the classical line, at any rate—will eventually be forced to meet Victor's new price of \$3.98 for a twelve-inch LP disk. There may be specific exceptions. If a record company has a unique album, an opera never recorded before, a specialty item over which it holds exclusive rights, it may be able to charge a higher price and get away with it. But in the realm of the standard repertory Victor exerts a potent force. Victor makes as good a record as any in the business, and a customer is going to think twice before paying \$5.95 for an "Eroica" or a "Pathétique" when he can purchase the work on a Victor label for \$3.98.

Hi-Fi Prevalent

Which is not to say that the Victor recording or performance is necessarily superior. But the chances are that it will be at least as good as competitive versions (again always granting specific exceptions). Apparently many record buyers, to judge from the mail that comes to this desk, are still confused about the various claims made by the record makers in the name of "hi-fi." Well, every reputable record maker in the business can truthfully lay claim to high fidelity records these days. This applies not only to the big companies but many of the small ones as well. Some companies may turn out a slightly superior product, but one seldom runs across a really bad record from anybody, these days. Indeed, many of the smaller companies



Artur Rubinstein plays Brahms' D minor Concerto on disk.

have their disks pressed in Victor or Columbia plants.

And now, back to the business of reviewing records. Some pianists are clamoring for attention. Those who have followed the discographic career of the Russian virtuoso Emil Gilels will find him represented by a new release. On an Angel disk he plays the Saint-Saëns Concerto No. 2 in G minor (Paris Conservatory Orchestra, under Cluytens) and Mozart's Sonata No. 16 in B flat (K. 570). The performance is a bit disappointing. In the first movement of the concerto a strangely, deliberate, studied tempo is taken; and while the furious pace of the finale is exhilarating, the result is more technique than music.

In this movement, too, Gilels makes a false entry (page 88 of the Durand score, in case anybody is interested). Normally one would not mention such a mishap; but in a recorded performance it is there for posterity to marvel at, and it is surprising that the participants did not re-do the faulty measure.

In the Vanguard recording of the same concerto, issued some time ago, Gilels takes a considerably slower tempo for the finale. No wrong entrance, either, and on the whole it is a better per-

formance, though not so colorfully recorded.

Artur Rubinstein, for Victor, turns to a piano concerto with which he is not normally identified—the Brahms No. 1 in D minor. He plays it with enormous flair, making a really romantic vehicle of the music rather than the ponderous-sounding bore it is in the hands of some pianists. Rubinstein is up against some formidable recorded competition—Backhaus, Serkin, Curzon, to mention only three—but he comes off brilliantly, and to this taste his is the most palatable and exciting Brahms First ever recorded.

Schumann Work

Rubinstein does not bring comparable excitement to his recording of Schumann's *Carnaval* and Franck's *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*. The Schumann, indeed, is for Rubinstein amazingly stodgy; and this despite a few sections of the utmost brilliance. One misses the snap and vitality usually heard from him.

Nor can several Chopin disks that Alexander Uninsky has made for Epic be unreservedly recommended. Uninsky gets the twenty-four Etudes on one disk, the Sonatas Nos. 2 and 3 on another. While he is a steady tech-

nician, he does not bring out the color and imagination of the music. We still have no really good version of the etudes on LP. For Chopin's B minor Sonata, Novaes or Kapell are more idiomatic; for the B flat minor, Novaes stands supreme on LP. Uninsky is more convincing in an Epic disk of Mussorgskys' *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Liszt's *Spanish Rhapsody* and three of Liszt's *Paganini Etudes*, where his bravura is the deciding factor.

A Spanish pianist named Alicia de Larrocha is heard on a Decca disk of pieces by Turina, including the popular and attractive *Danzas Fantasticas* as well as the *Ciclo Pianistico* and the *Recuerdas de la Antigua España*. She sounds like a fine pianist, and gets considerable stylistic authority into her playing, which is further graced by a fluent technique. A charming disk that could have been recorded with greater definition and "presence."

So esoteric an item as Bartók's *For Children*, a large collection of seventy-nine piano pieces (in its revised edition) has already had two complete LP recordings. Now comes a third. Geza Anda has recorded Book I for Angel, along with Bartók's *Sonatina*, and it is safe to assume that his performance of Book II will soon be along. Anda handles the music with more color than either Kozma or Pressler, his LP competitors. Kozma and Pressler stress the rhythmic and percussive elements more strongly, whereas Anda is softer and more "pianistic." Each of these interpretations is valid, and each is well recorded. The music is related to Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*, though it is prevalently folk-derived. Some of the sketches are remarkably imaginative.

IN BRIEF

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: *Fantasia on "Old 104" Psalm Tune; Three Sea Chanties*; **PALMER:** *Chamber Concerto No. 1*; Rochester Chamber Orchestra and Cornell A Cappella Choir conducted by Robert Hull (Concert Hall). Modern works, ably presented. None of these has been recorded previously on LP. Good recorded sound.

WOLPE: *Violin Sonata; Passacaglia for Piano; Quartet for Tenor Saxophone, Trumpet, Percussion and Piano*; Frances Magnes, violinist; David Tudor, pianist; quartet conducted by Samuel Baron (Esoteric). Very advanced, dissonant music. Each of the performers is a specialist, and they do honor to Wolpe's cause. Admirable recorded sound.

Music: Lady From Spain

Local Piano Debut by
 Alicia de Larrocha

ALICIA DE LARROCHA, pianist. At Town Hall.
 Suite Française.....Herbert Murrill
 Sonata in A flat, Op. 110.....Beethoven
 Carnaval.....Schumann
 Three Spanish Songs and Dances.....Surinach
 Los Requebros; Que o la Maya y el Rulsenor; El Pelele.....Granados
 El Polo; Lavapies; Eritana.....Albeniz

ALICIA DE LARROCHA, a diminutive lady from Spain with the technique and stamina of a man, made her New York debut yesterday afternoon in Town Hall. Her program was not an easy one, but she played everything with security. It was after the intermission, however, with the Spanish pieces, that her playing really came to life.

In the Beethoven A flat Sonata and in Schumann's "Carnaval," especially in the latter, Señorita de Larrocha was always the skillful pianist, attending to the music in a businesslike manner, frequently turning a phrase with spirit, but never showing any great identification with the musical style. Planning rather than spontaneity was in evidence.

But in the Spanish group the playing was difficult to overpraise. It had style and skill, subtlety and color. Even in so long and difficult a piece as the "Requebros" from the "Goyescas" set by Granados, Señorita de Larrocha carried the music superbly, never letting the immense technical demands distract her from the plasticity of the writing.

She had a way of idiomatically shaping a musical phrase that cannot be taught—a sudden dynamic shift, a note instinctively accented, a touch of the pedal, an application of rubato. Her rhythm was extraordinarily flexible. Obviously this music was in the pianist's blood. She invested it with a degree of life and imagination that not many pianists before the public to-



Alicia de Larrocha

day could begin to duplicate.

Fortunately her tone never lost color. Some artists who specialize in Spanish piano music bring a highly percussive touch to their playing, using the pedal sparingly and adopting a semi-detached type of fingering that makes the music sound angular. Señorita de Larrocha maintained a legato touch, except, of course, in those instances where the music called for abrupt attacks.

The "Suite Française" that unconventionally opened the program was composed by Herbert Murrill, a British composer and former music director of the B. B. C., who died in 1949. Very much in the French style, even to almost actual quotation from Ravel's "Tombeau de Couperin," it is expertly laid out for the piano. And that is about all that can be said for it.

H. C. S.

April, 17, 1955