

BEHIND THE NEEDLE—V

LOOKING OVER FORTY YEARS OF THE GRAMOPHONE

By HERBERT C. RIDOUT

HAVING commented in passing on the tonal quality of records made in a hall, as were those of the Ellery Band, as against those recorded in the studio, this seems an appropriate place at which to refer to the actual conditions under which records were being made at this time and for some twelve years after.

The recording room—only in later years was it euphemistically described as a studio—was an interesting study by comparison with that of to-day. For all sorts of devices had to be used to focus and concentrate the artist and band upon the horn or horns connected with the recording stylus. The recording machine was in one room, the artists in another. One serious problem was to secure steady running of the wax disc on the turntable. Clock-work motors and electric motors were tried, but the pull of the stylus would often vary the speed and this, even if infinitesimal, would ruin the reproduction. Finally, the best method was found to be the simple scheme of a counter-weight, carefully adjusted, and this, like other contrivances in the recording room, remained in use right up to the coming of electric recording.

In the recording room the problem was not only enforced focusing upon the horn, but the right balance of the orchestra or band. So there were a number of small platforms of varying heights, each large enough to hold a chair and a music stand. The piano, always an upright, had its back removed. The Stroh violins were nearest the horn. Muted strings were never mentioned. The French horns, having to direct the bells of their instruments towards the recording horn, would turn their backs on it and were provided with mirrors in which they could watch the conductor. The tuba was positioned right back away from the horn and his bell turned away from it; he also watched in a mirror. The big drum never entered a recording room. For a flute obbligato the flautist would leave his seat, dash round and take his place alongside the singer, and then rush back to his stand.

For singer with orchestra, two horns would be used, sometimes more. The horns themselves were strapped lavishly with adhesive tape to kill any inherent metallic ring. All sorts and sizes and shapes of horns and different materials were tried, for each recording engineer was an earnest student in his job, bent on overcoming the difficulties and the losses incurred in the sinuous ways traversed by sound between the actual artist and the recording stylus.

The horns projected into the recording-machine room through a partition. Here, where the operators worked, was a shrine of mystery. Nobody was allowed to pass into it. It was some years before I apparently established the necessary confidence in my colleagues to be permitted to enter its portals. Yet there was not much to be seen. A turntable mounted on a heavy steel base, controlled by a gravity weight, a floating arm with its recording diaphragm. A small bench, usually strewn with spare diaphragms, and a heating cupboard where the wax blanks were slightly warmed to soften the recording surface.

Through a sliding glass panel in the partition the recorder could communicate with artists and conductor. He could be dimly seen watching the revolving disc and gently blowing away the curling spirals of wax as the recording stylus cut the sound waves. It was some years before a glass suction tube was installed as a substitute for the recorder's breath to carry off the wax shavings.

We may smile to-day at the determined efforts of the recorders to keep their work behind the screen a dead secret. For they all observed it—Russell Hunting, Fred and Will Gaisberg, Sinklar Darby, Arthur Brooks, Charles Gregory, and the rest. But that shroud of mystery was one of the greatest assets the industry ever had, and the fact that it was so cleverly cultivated and maintained

over so many years went far to prevent the gramophone from being considered commonplace. As a publicity man, I was specially able to appreciate its tremendous value.

Arthur Brooks was our artists' director and engaged all our artists, as well as being our chief recorder. He was, too, a genius in resourcefulness. Charlie Gregory, his recording colleague, was his equal in mechanical genius. Between them they did great work for the gramophone. Some years later, Arthur Brooks, in his patient research, hit upon the idea of doming the recording room to improve the acoustics by acting as a sounding-board. So if ever a tenant of the top floor at Clerkenwell Road is puzzled by the arched effect of the ceiling, he may by enquiry discover that this was one of the many artifices employed earlier this century in the never-ending effort to secure realism in gramophone recording.

With the coming of the microphone practically all these recording devices were swept away.

Dealing with the problems of those days would not be a complete story without reference to the Columbia musical director, Albert W. Ketelbey, whom I saw frequently. After a recording session he would drop into my room for a chat.

He had joined the Company in the early days of the American organisation in London, when Frank and Marion Dorian, John Cromelin, and James Van Allen Shields were in charge. That was about November, 1907, he tells me, and he was engaged as "impresario." A little later he was asked to take an orchestral session to accompany an Italian opera singer to see if he could do better than the conductor engaged, who apparently did not satisfy the artist. As a result he was invited to carry on in that capacity and he became musical director and adviser. With only a break of a few months he held the job until he resigned about 1925, and still continued to conduct occasionally up till March, 1930.

In that post Albert Ketelbey worked like a giant and not only gave generously of himself but got every ounce out of those who played under him. His knowledge of music was abnormal and he was as conscientious and painstaking over a little effect in a comic song as over the orchestral accompaniments to the stars of opera and concert platform. He worked through the years of stress as well as the years of comparative calm guiding artists and recorders through the trying transition from acoustic recording to electric recording, patiently experimenting musically during that period with the utterly new conditions created at every turn by the adoption of the microphone. Assuredly he always had a lot to put up with to secure a nice balance between the technical demands and limitations of the recorders, the temperament of artists, and his own musical conscience, from the very beginning, and these assumed new proportions and presented fresh difficulties when the new recording came in. From first to last Albert Ketelbey, like many around him, never lost the spirit of gramophone adventure.

He saw the *volte face* executed by a lot of the highbrows among artists when they discovered there was money in recording, for when first he approached them in earlier days he was met by the contemptuous suggestion that it would be very *infra dig* for them to perform for records!

There was one incident in his experience with us that, while it aptly illustrates the tempestuous energy I often saw him infuse into his work, resulted in an unfortunate accident from which he suffers to this day. He was conducting for Frank Mullings (one of the airs from "Otello," I believe) and as the aria worked up in intensity, both artist and conductor got so excited that Ketelbey actually burst a blood vessel in the back of one of his eyes.

It was in October, 1915, that we issued a record of a then unknown work called "In a Monastery Garden," and I think we must have been animated by the wish to give our friend Albert Ketelbey's piece a good send-off, because the coupling on the record was the more famous "Destiny" waltz. But there soon came a time when "Monastery Garden" stood quite well on its own merits and became such a success that it pointed out a distinct path for its composer to follow.

I know Albert Ketelbey would have preferred to be identified with the more serious music he had composed and published (some of it under the *nom-de-plume* of Anton Vodorinski) and, but for a purely accidental happening in connection with his "Monastery Garden," this might well have been the case. The story really began two years or so earlier and in a recording atmosphere, so is quite apropos here.

Among the members of the orchestra regularly employed by Ketelbey for recording was a clarinet player named Scoma. In the summer months every year, when orchestral engagements in London were at their lowest ebb, Scoma himself conducted an orchestra of his own at Bridlington during the holiday season. Being great friends with Ketelbey, Scoma asked him if he would write for him an original orchestral work that he could feature as a novelty in his seaside programmes. That was in 1912. After paying a visit to Scoma at Bridlington, Ketelbey conceived the idea of "In a Monastery Garden" and passed the manuscript to Scoma. The latter soon began to report in excited letters that the little work not only aroused enthusiasm when played, but that he was receiving enquiries as to its publication. Scoma repeated the performances the following season, and this time declared that he had been pestered with requests for it in published form, rather shrewdly, however, advising the composer against publication for the moment, urging patience until it had been thoroughly tried out. He played it yet a third year at Bridlington, but this time news of its reception had travelled to London independently, for Ketelbey was approached by several London publishers anxious to secure it. Eventually, J. H. Larway was the publisher chosen—at Ketelbey's own terms!

The rest is history. Very soon the composer followed it with works of similar character, capitalising his *flair* for presenting not only orchestral colour in music, but conveying easily recognisable pictures under such titles as "In a Persian Market," "Sanctuary of the Heart," "Bells Across the Meadows," "In a Chinese Temple Garden" and many others.

There are those who profess scorn at the music of Albert Ketelbey, but with sheer universal popularity as the test, these are the same people who decry Tchaikovsky for daring to write, among other things, "1812." Anyway, despite many attempts at imitation there has never been any to match the Ketelbey picture-music, as I prefer to call it, either in its individuality or its popularity.

As for myself, I take some pride in having played a modest part in persuading the powers that were, some sixteen years later, to issue a couple of albums of Ketelbey's works under the conductorship of the composer. In doing so, I ought to add truthfully that this advocacy was not prompted only out of friendship for Albert Ketelbey, but, because my job was selling records, I knew full well that authentic composer-recordings of such popular works would outsell any other versions.

Merely as a matter of historical fact, I record that in January, 1913, Columbia took possession of the building in Clerkenwell Road, this event synchronising with the time when we were beginning to receive important additions to our catalogue from America. Scharwenka, Bonci, Zenatello, Slezak, Destinn, Josef Hofmann (then a boy prodigy), Mary Garden, Olive Fremstad, Orville Harrold (the tenor with whom Oscar Hammerstein opened his ill-fated London Opera House in Kingsway—now the Stoll Picture Theatre) and the first of the only records the grand violinist, Ysaye, ever made. I think it was typical of Ysaye's appreciation of what the gramophone might mean that he recorded so much of the newer music of his day—Fauré's "Berceuse," two Wieniawski mazurkas, Chabrier's Scherzo Valse among it—

rather than the older lighter classics which were already in danger of being hackneyed by constant recorded performance.

Here in England, in spite of the production difficulties caused by the destruction of our factory, we were not idle. Sir Charles Santley, then 79, was persuaded out of his retirement to make a series of records for us, and our old friends, the Sheffield Choir (at the time filling an engagement at the Coliseum and so able to record in our own studio) began an association with Columbia that continued until well after the introduction of electric recording.

Alongside all these developments we made our first efforts to build up a new tenor—or rather two new tenors. The first was Walter Wheatley, a young American who had made a substantial success in his own country and came over here to set the Thames on fire. His voice had a penetrating quality and "came through" well, but although he sold well as, indeed, all new tenors right through the story of the industry have sold, we did not succeed in persuading even ourselves that we had a new Caruso, and accordingly soon after turned our attention to another "discovery," Morgan Kingston. He had all the elements that made a good story. Pony-driver in a pit, church choirboy, playing in a brass band, tenor soloist at a Nottingham concert for 5s. (doubled by enthusiastic organisers), and so on. This "local boy makes good" background was then, as now, a safe card to play, and as Morgan Kingston had a pleasant round voice, with an excellent command of top notes, he was very quickly thrust into prominence. He was only allowed to make twelve-inch records, to keep him "classy," as it were.

Morgan Kingston was our star tenor for over four years and, so far as we were concerned, his progress during that time in public performance and on records brought him to the point where he was generally accepted, if not perhaps as "our greatest British tenor" as was claimed, certainly not far short of it. I think there is no doubt he would have gone much farther, but he was invited to America, I believe to sing at the Metropolitan Opera House, and thereafter he was lost to records. We were very sorry about that.

Exciting times came in 1913 when a make of German records was announced at 1s. 6d. The British manufacturers viewed this as a threat to the industry which they were endeavouring to develop on stabilised prices, half-a-crown the recognised standard. To compete with this and keep the trade in British hands, the Gramophone and Columbia companies, by mutual arrangement, each brought out a shilling record (really 1s. 1d.), and flooded the cheap market with them. The war of 1914-1918 ended the situation, both the German records and the shilling records disappearing.

One incident occurred that year that was without precedent and has, I am pretty sure, never had to be repeated since. Overnight, as it seemed, there had flashed across the horizon a popular song, "You Made Me Love You," and the demand for records of it could not be met. We had to ask the American Columbia factory to manufacture 25,000 for us. English labels were printed here and expressed to Bridgeport, Conn. The records were pressed with the English labels and the complete shipment received in London in a little under a month, substantially easing the position on our deliveries.

A certain spirit of enterprise and rivalry was animating some of our seaside resorts about this time. Bournemouth, among South Coast towns, was already famous for its high-class music under Dan Godfrey, and now one of the fashionable northern seaside resorts, Southport, conceived the idea that records of their military band would be an excellent advertisement for the town. The corporation offered us every facility if we would make the records and once again I accompanied Arthur Brooks on a recording expedition as press agent. That was in September, 1913, and we recorded the Southport Corporation Military Band in a local school. The band really was a fine organisation brought to a high pitch by its conductor, William Rimmer, himself famous as a composer of brass band music. Our own needs were carefully looked after by a youngster named Wolstenholme, and he was so enthusiastic about everything that I fancy the whole idea must

have been his. Anyhow, to-day that youngster is the general manager of the Southport Publicity and Attractions Department. Among the records made we got a fine twelve-inch recording of the Rachmaninov Prelude and Liebestraume, and the fact that this stayed in the catalogues for some fifteen years is proof enough in itself that both parties to the contract had every reason to be satisfied ; I know we were.

But there was one incident of that trip that is a treasured memory. At the end of one afternoon recording session, Arthur Brook declared his intention of going over to the Argyle Theatre, Birkenhead, where his friend (and our artist) Bransby Williams was appearing. So I had my introduction to this historic old theatre, whose veteran proprietor told of old contracts made with great music-hall stars at salaries that ruled when they were newcomers. One of these, he claimed, enabled him to engage to-day

a world-famous Scots comedian at £15 a week ! But Bransby Williams was our mark and after seeing the show through, he took us off to his diggings to entertain us. Of all he discoursed upon, and he did so impressively and learnedly, the thing I remember most vividly is his keen interest in cowboy and Wild West stories. It was well after midnight before he allowed us to leave. In Liverpool we found the last train had gone, but in St. George's Square we managed to persuade a taxi-driver to take us to Southport for a couple of pounds. That midnight journey of twenty miles was quite an experience in itself, for two or three times the driver lost himself and was obliged to unlimber one of his oil lamps to read the signposts. But 3 a.m. found us seated on the main staircase of the Prince of Wales's Hotel gratefully absorbing a much-needed drink before turning in. Wonderful days.

(To be continued)