

The BSO and the Talking Machine



THE ENTIRE Eastern seaboard of the United States was sweltering in the grip of a brutal Indian Summer heat wave on the first day of October 1917. In a hundred homes in Boston, bags were being packed and their owners preparing to take the 7:30 p.m. train bound for Philadelphia. Embarking on a trip was nothing new to these men: they were the hundred members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and half-a-dozen times each season they went "on the road" for a week or more at a time. As a matter of fact, it was barely two years since they had collected their gear for what had been the most extensive tour in the orchestra's history—a cross-country trip which had taken them to San Francisco for a triumphant series of thirteen concerts at the Panama-Pacific Exposition.

But there was something different about the preparations this time. For one thing, the orchestra had not yet officially begun its 1917-18 season on the familiar stage of Symphony Hall—that was still ten days off, on October 12 and 13—yet here the men already were preparing for an expedition. For another, there was the oppressive, debilitating heat. String players wondered how they would ever be able to keep their instruments in tune. And what about the sensitive timpani skins, how would they survive the twin ordeals of weather and

transportation? And then there was the most important difference of all: the orchestra was going on tour, to be sure, but not for the familiar purpose of playing a series of concerts in a string of cities before enthusiastic audiences. No, the only visible audience the Boston Symphony musicians would have for their impending performances were to be sound technicians and a couple of enormous acoustical recording horns.

Probably nobody in the official party that day fully realized the significance of the occasion, but the Boston Symphony Orchestra was headed for the Camden, New Jersey, laboratory of the Victor Talking Machine Company, there to become the first symphony orchestra in the United States ever to make a phonograph record.

Actually, the Victor Company was late in entering the field of orchestral recording. The first large-scale symphony orchestra recording, a performance of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* Suite by the London Palace Orchestra under Hermann Finck, was released in April 1909, by the English branch of the German Odeon Company. During the next two years the Gramophone Company in England was releasing recordings, by Landon Ronald and the New Symphony Orchestra, of such works as the scherzo from Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream, the Overture to *The Marriage of Figaro*, and Sibelius' *Finlandia* (a score composed only a dozen years before!). Similarly, in Germany locally made symphony orchestra recordings had been available since 1911, and Odeon in 1913 produced the first complete symphonies ever issued—Beethoven's Fifth and Sixth.

It was with some excitement, despite the weather, that the early birds among the members of the Orchestra began to arrive at South Station. By six in the evening enough of them had gathered so that throughout the waiting room there were small groups of men playing cards, checkers, or chess. Shortly before seven Dr. Karl Muck, their conductor, arrived on the scene. He had come directly from his summer home in Maine; he was wearing knickers, and his face was beaded with perspiration. By 7:15 Manager Charles A. Ellis and Assistant Manager William Brennan had checked in the last member, and at exactly 7:30 the train slowly began to pull out.

The overnight train ride to Philadelphia in that pre-air-conditioned era was miserable. Sleep was virtually impossible and many players spent the night wandering through the cars chatting with their colleagues. In the conductor's stateroom Muck and Leslie Rogers, the Librarian, conferred about the repertory to be recorded. Only the finale from Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony was definitely on the schedule, with the remaining pieces yet to be selected. Muck wanted to do movements from other symphonies, Rogers strongly favored shorter, lighter works (and, unknown to Muck, had packed the scores and parts of several such selections, among them the Prelude to the Third Act of *Lohengrin*, the *Marche miniature* from Tchaikovsky's First Suite and the *Bakoczy* March from *The Damnation of Faust*).

Philadelphia's Broad Street Station was like a steam bath when the train arrived early on the morning of Tuesday, October 2. The sleeping cars had to be vacated at 7 a.m. and so, in the semidarkness that precedes the rising of the sun, the hundred weary musicians staggered out of the train and onto the buses which were to take them across the river to Camden.

When they finally arrived at their destination, tempers were strained and nobody was in the least enthusiastic about the work at hand—10 a.m. and 2 p.m. recording sessions in the laboratory each day from Tuesday through Friday.

One of those who greeted the orchestra was Victor Herbert, who three years earlier had formed ASCAP and now was vitally interested

in being present at the sessions. After the preliminary introductions were concluded, the entire orchestra was ushered into the "studio" where the recordings were to be made.

The sight that greeted the musicians' eyes must have looked like something out of a Rube Goldberg cartoon: "The studio was formerly a church, I believe. Inside it were set up two large wooden igloo-type structures, each with a sort of doorlike opening. We were told that all the strings were to sit in one of these hovels, the rest of the orchestra in the other. Outside and in front of these igloos there was set up a stool and a music stand for the conductor, who would have to peek into the openings. It seems to me that there was a horn that came out of these openings and converged on a needle which made the impression upon the wax in front of the conductor." The words are those of Arthur Fiedler, for the past twenty-eight seasons the conductor of the Boston Pops Orchestra and in October 1917 a member of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, playing violin and viola.

Seeing the physical conditions under which they would have to work, the musicians must have been appalled. However, though slowly and glumly, one hundred instrument cases were opened, and the orchestra's solo oboe player, the renowned Georges Longy, sounded his A. One hundred times the sound was reëchoed as there followed that dynamic, cacophonous bedlam produced when an orchestra tunes up. They steamed and they fumed, but they were all—in spite of themselves—beginning to be infected with the challenge and excitement soon to be felt everywhere in the room.

Shortly before ten o'clock the men were marched into their little "igloos" and Dr. Muck took his position outside. They began to work on the Tchaikovsky. Retake after retake was made, sometimes because the engineers weren't satisfied, sometimes because fatigue and the brutal heat caused mistakes.

Boaz Piller, who played bassoon and contra-bassoon in the orchestra from 1916 until his retirement a few seasons ago, is another who remembers the sessions. "There was trouble getting the different instruments to register," Piller recalls. "There was a very amusing incident in the transition section of the Tchaikovsky finale. No matter how hard he tried, Longy was unable to make his oboe solo register. So he was asked to come out of the little hut and sit right in front of the large horn. Still that was not satisfactory. They finally had him put his instrument *right inside* the recording horn—and this time it did." *Continued on page 124*

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register. Dr. Muck, with his usual sarcasm and dry sense of humor, got a real kick out of it and the orchestra got a good laugh!

On the sessions went, the rest of Tuesday, all day Wednesday, the same on Thursday, and again on Friday. When the Tchaikovsky finale was satisfactorily engraved, it was decided to go ahead and record the shorter pieces that Librarian Rogers had brought along. No tour that the orchestra had ever undertaken was more strenuous than this, but by the end of the last session, on Friday afternoon, everyone shared the exhilaration of having participated in a great event. Even Dr. Muck, who had at first resented having to leave his comfortable Maine home a week early, was pleased with the results.

How pleased can best be judged from an anecdote told in the November 1926 issue of *The Phonograph Monthly Review*, one of the earliest periodicals in the United States devoted exclusively to news, information, and reviews of records. Dr. Muck, Victor Herbert, and some of the recording men were a little late arriving at one of the final sessions. As they approached the door of the studio, they heard coming from inside the sounds of the Tchaikovsky finale. "What are they rehearsing the Tchaikovsky again for?" someone exclaimed. "That's all finished and recorded; they should be rehearsing the *Lohengrin* Prelude." When the door opened, it was discovered that what they had been hearing was a playback of the record which had been made the day before!

It was late Friday afternoon, October 4, when the exhausted musicians filed slowly out of the Victor laboratory and onto the buses waiting to take them back to Philadelphia. They spent the early evening in the City of Brotherly Love, but they were all too tired for anything but boarding the train back to Boston. At 10:45 p.m. they were on their way home. In contrast to the trip out, this time there were no card games, no groups keeping each other awake all night. They remained in their own cars and slept as though they had been drugged.

A week later the orchestra's season officially began with the traditional Friday afternoon concert in Symphony Hall. By the time December arrived, the events of the first week of October seemed like a dream. But the arrival of the December bulletin

of the Victor Talking Machine Company served to bring them vividly back to memory.

A triumph—first records by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, ran the proud announcement on the center-page spread. Three discs constituted that first release of December 1917—exactly forty years ago last month. The finale of the Tchaikovsky Fourth Symphony occupied two single-faced twelve-inch discs (74553-4), each selling for \$1.50; the Prelude to the Third Act of *Lohengrin* (64744) was on a single-faced ten-inch disc which sold for \$1.00.

From the response of both critics and public it is clear that no orchestral recordings produced anywhere until that time compared in impact with these first Boston Symphony Orchestra recordings. When he heard the finished discs, Victor Herbert exclaimed: "At last it is possible to present the performances of a symphony orchestra! Now, everything is possible!" R. D. Darrell, a critic whose writing enlivens these very pages each month, wrote: "The tone of the wood winds is so exquisite that one can only marvel. Precision, phrasing, and tone are equaled only by the balance and clarity. It is hard to avoid superlatives when describing these records . . . There was never anything like them before, there can never be anything quite like them again." And the announcement in the Victor bulletin concludes with these words: "After years of research and experimentation, we feel that this, our latest achievement, is worthy of our best traditions, for it makes available a whole province of music which so far has remained untouched, and offers the music lover the first of a series of symphony orchestra records which far surpass any orchestral records obtainable anywhere in the world." If this sounds strangely like current pronouncements from this or that record company about its most recent developments in ultra-fidelity or stereophony, it proves only that the advertising copy writer of 1957 bears a remarkable likeness to his 1917 counterpart.

1947 was the year designated in these pages recently as "the Year One of the present high-fidelity enthusiasm." In a larger sense, however, this date can be moved back three decades, to 1917, and the heroic attempts of the engineers in Camden to reproduce the cymbal crash with which the finale of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony begins. The ultimate in high-fidelity reproduction will probably remain forever unattainable,

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but whatever victories have been won in this continuing battle in the past forty years were signalled by that cymbal crash in 1917.

One final footnote remains to be added. It was the intent of the Victor Talking Machine Company to launch the heaviest advertising campaign in its history in the promotion of the Boston Symphony Orchestra recordings. Included in the plans was a double-page spread in the *Saturday Evening Post*. A few weeks after the discs were released, however, there began a whispering campaign against Dr. Muck and his alleged pro-German sympathies. America had joined the Allies in April 1917, and in the era of incendiary emotions which followed anybody with German ties was suspect; Muck, the most prominent German conductor of the time and a favorite of the Kaiser's, was especially vulnerable. He was jailed in March 1918, and then deported. This unpleasantness brought with it a cancellation by the Victor Talking Machine Company of all its plans for the promotion of the records and for a time they even stopped pressing the discs. During the next ten years the Boston Symphony Orchestra remained conspicuously absent from the recording studios.

It was not until November 13, 1928, in Serge Koussevitzky's fifth season as Music Director, that it again made records. A decade of silence is a long period in phonographic history, but the contribution of those first hundred musicians who made the grimy trek to Camden assuredly cannot be measured by quantity alone.