

Bartók  
String Quartets Complete

Juilliard String Quartet

Robert Mann & Isidore Cohen (violins)  
Raphael Hillyer (viola)  
Claus Adam (cello)

Recorded May and September 1963 at Columbia Recording Studios, New York  
Producer: Paul Myers  
Recording Engineer: Fred Plaut  
Remastered by Cohearent, Los Angeles

Speakers Corner 180gm 3 LP box-set: Columbia D3S 717

Bartók  
Violin Concerto No.2

Isaac Stern  
New York Philharmonic Orchestra  
Leonard Bernstein

Recorded February 1958 at Columbia 30<sup>th</sup> Street, Studio, New York  
Producer: Howard H. Scott  
Sound Engineer: Jack Ashkinzy  
Remastered by Cohearent, Los Angeles

Stereo 180gm LP from Speakers Corner: MS 6002

Stravinsky  
Violin Concerto in D Major  
Symphony in Three Movements

Isaac Stern (vln)  
Columbia Symphony Orchestra  
Igor Stravinsky

Recorded February and June 1961 at American Legion Hall, Hollywood  
Producer: John McClure  
Recording Engineer: Edwin Michalski  
Remastered by Masterdisk, New York

Speakers Corner 180gm LP: Columbia MS 6331

Stravinsky

Les Noces (sung in English)  
Renard (sung in English)  
Ragtime for Eleven Instruments

Samuel Barber, Aaron Copland, Lukas Foss, Roger Sessions (piano)  
Toni Koves (cimbalom)  
Mildred Allen (sop), Regina Sarfety (mez sop), Loren Driscoll, George Shirley (ten), William  
Murphy (bar), Donald Gramm (bass)  
American Concert Choir  
Columbia Chamber Ensemble  
Columbia Percussion Ensemble  
Igor Stravinsky

Les Noces recorded New York, December 21, 1959.  
Renard & Ragtime recorded Manhattan Center, New York, January 26, 1962  
Remastered by Kevin Gray, Cohearant, Los Angeles

Speakers Corner 180gm LP: Columbia Masterworks MS 6372

Gershwin  
Rhapsody in Blue  
An American in Paris

Leonard Bernstein (piano and conductor)  
Columbia Symphony Orchestra (Rhapsody)  
New York Philharmonic Orchestra

Recorded in June 1959 and December 1958 at St Georges Hotel, Brooklyn, New York  
Recording Engineers: Fred Plaut and Frank Bruno  
Producer: John McClure  
Remastered by Masterdisk, New York

Speakers Corner 180gm LP: MS 6091

Chamber Music From Marlboro  
Brahms: Liebeslieder-Waltzes Op. 52  
Schubert: The Shepard on The Rock D 965

Rudolf Serkin, Leon Fleisher (piano), Harold Wright (clarinet) Benita Valente (sop), Marlana  
Kleinman (mez-sop), Wayne Connor (ten), Martial Singher (bar)

Recorded August 1960 at Marlboro School of Music, Vermont  
Producer: Howard H. Scott  
Recording Engineer: Fred Plaut  
Remastered by Masterdisk, New York

Speakers Corner 180gm LP: Columbia MS 6236

Tchaikovsky

Symphony No.6 in B minor, Op.74

New York Philharmonic Orchestra  
Dimitri Mitropoulos

Recorded 22 April at, Studio 30th Street, New York  
Remastered by Masterdisk, New York

Speakers Corner 180gm vinyl: MS 6006

Prokofiev:  
Romeo and Juliet, Op.64 (Excerpts)

New York Philharmonic Orchestra  
Dimitri Mitropoulos

Recorded in November 1957 at St George Hotel, Brooklyn, New York  
Producer: Howard H. Scott  
Recording Engineers: Fred Plaut and Stan Tonkel  
Remastered by Masterdisk, New York

Speakers Corner have continued to release CBS discs, including the Juilliard Quartet's second version (having first recorded them in 1950) of the Bartók Quartets. They play the First Quartet's opening Lento as a slow dirge, the dynamic range piano and below, for all of the ensuing Allegretto's chromaticism the Juilliards still inject a degree of romantic largesse into their phrasing, but in the Allegro vivace finale more attack is needed. There is a sense of conversation between the players in the Second Quartet, as they delineate the first movement's radical polyphony, in what is effectively the scherzo they sharply accentuate the dance rhythms and the closing Lento is imbued with a deep sense of foreboding.



Bartók used folk-like themes and motifs in the single movement Third, with sul ponticello and col legno bowing and some glorious glissando like portamenti, contained within short sections that coalesce into two larger wholes. The Juilliards effortlessly convey each change of pace, mood, dynamic and texture, although their pizzicati aren't quite violent enough. Number Four is in five linked movements; here their sophisticated playing captures every change of direction and emotion, including some beautiful cello playing by Claus Adam in the central night-music.

In the Fifth the second movement Adagio molto is quite rightly very slow, the Scherzo suitably rustic and despite the climax of the third movement lacking savagery, the finale is delightfully sprung and elfin. The Sixth is a profoundly serious, tragic, yet beautiful work. Here the Juilliards weight, variety of tone and depth of expression are superb, the final bars desolate. In conclusion then, these marvellous performances can be recommended alongside classic versions by the likes of the Talich and Végis Quartets.

It says a lot about record collecting that you can buy the original CBS box-set of these performances for as little as €25.00, but the equivalent British Columbia SAX discs (produced under licence) cost up to ten times that amount. These Speakers Corner discs use the later grey and orange as opposed to first American grey two-eye label, which is unfortunate given the price of around £65.00 plus postage and packing, but presumably dictated by the available Sony/BMG archive material.

In terms of sound the overall balance is more forward than on the CBS first label LPs mentioned above without being in your face, although it is slightly more recessed in the First and Fifth Quartets recorded in September 1963. There is excellent definition and clarity, which means unlike so many recordings the cello's lower register is clean as opposed to boomy, the players are locked in place, can be heard as individuals in climaxes and the frequency response is smooth and extended. Because a recording studio as opposed to a larger hall was used there is a short reverberation time, which is ideal for chamber music and being analogue the room's acoustic is vividly captured. The dynamic range is good, if not exceptional, instrumental timbres have real vibrancy and naturalness; much the same can be said about the sense of presence which is tangible and exceptionally lifelike and here the Speakers Corner LPs are superior to the originals.



Moving to the Bartók Concerto, we have the perhaps under-rated Isaac Stern, where the opening harp led bars sound like something out of Aida and when Stern enters one hears his incredibly rich tone and effortless virtuosity, which means nothing - including the fiendishly difficult first movement cadenza - fazes him. The long stream of scales and arpeggios that the soloist then plays bring immaculate intonation from Stern and his double-stopping is incisive. In the six bar phrase starting at 51, the Tranquillo, Rallentando and Risoluto markings are all observed and throughout the work the performers observe an unusually high proportion of the composer's instructions (something that big names are not always noted for). In the cadenza there is tremendous attack and perhaps only an eastern European (Stern was Ukrainian) could phrase and point the rhythms in such a way.

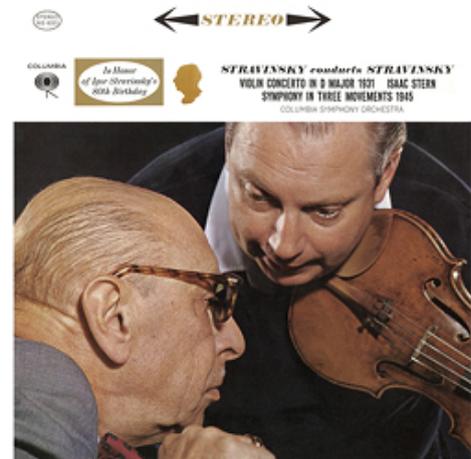
Bartók marked the second movement set of variations Andante tranquillo and here Stern and Bernstein adopt a measured tempo that allows the main theme to sing and bring added contrast to the scherzando like sections, where the percussion and Stern's spiccato are crisply exact. The finale is also a set of free variations all of which are beautifully characterised by Serkin, where - as throughout the work - Bernstein and his players are brilliant partners.

Unfortunately the sound is a bit of a mess. As is often the case the soloist is unnaturally dominant, the strings are somewhere in the background and in higher lying passages the violins sound thin. As ever with Bartók the woodwind offer a fairly constant commentary on the unfolding musical narrative and for most of the time they are almost completely inaudible, as are the brass and while the exposed timpani and percussion parts in the Andante can be heard, the rest of the time they are swallowed up by the amorphous quality of the orchestral image which isn't helped by the recessed overall balance and reverberant acoustic. Fortunately Isaac Stern fares better, his violin having a richer tone without any loss of definition, although the upper harmonics are absent, something that analogue should reproduce effortlessly and the dynamic range is no more than adequate. A two-eye second label disc was used for comparison, which has

greater transparency, definition and treble extension, although Stern's violin sound isn't quite as rich.

Stravinsky's wonderfully jaunty, witty, acerbic - yet lyrical - neo-classical Violin Concerto has fared well on disc, with classic accounts from the likes of Arthur Grumiaux, Wolfgang Schneiderhan and Itzhak Perlman, so how does Isaac Stern compare with these luminaries?

The work opens with a distinctive melodic, rhythmic fragment that clearly derives from *The Soldiers Tale*, which will recur in various forms at the start of each of the four movements. Stern attacks this gracefully; he then bounces his way through the *Toccata*. His tone is rich, yet transparent; he uses variable vibrato and occasional portamenti. In *Aria I* and *II* his expressive palette is richly romantic and in all three movements Stern isn't afraid to draw out phrases and slightly alter the basic tempo, which the composer deftly follows. He then dances through the concluding *Capriccio*, throughout the work Stern never forgets that the composer intended the violin part to be first among equals, not a virtuoso showpiece and this account is the equal of those mentioned above.



There is more neo-classicism in the tremendous *Symphony in Three Movements*, which the composer powers his way through with enormous attack, weight, rhythmic panache, textural clarity without losing the ability to relax playfully in the delightful *Andante* and the Columbia Symphony play marvellously for him. As an added attraction the sleeve notes feature the composer talking to Robert Craft about the *Violin Concerto*, where he admits that he doesn't like the concertos of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and Mendelssohn, which shows that being a genius doesn't preclude being seriously misguided.

Unfortunately the sound isn't in the same class as the performances. Recorded in 1961 the image sounds more like something from the start of the stereo era as opposed to the beginning of the classic age of valve/tube recording. At the start of the *Concerto* the prominent woodwind parts - within a middle-distance overall balance - are unnaturally spot-lit and don't have the defined natural timbre found on Decca recordings of the period. Overall balance is fairly forward, but the sound engineer, like Stern, clearly realised this is a concertante work and didn't closely mike him. Definition and clarity are reasonable without being exceptional, the dynamic range is somewhat muted, and while no register dominates, there is a lack of treble sparkle and deep bass.



Two of Stravinsky's vocal masterworks are featured on the next disc. *Renard* is a burlesque with dancer-acrobats and singers that tells the tale of the fox deceiving the cock, cat and ram before the last two kill him. The music is delightfully tuneful, fast-moving, rhythmically incisive and the performance is exceptionally

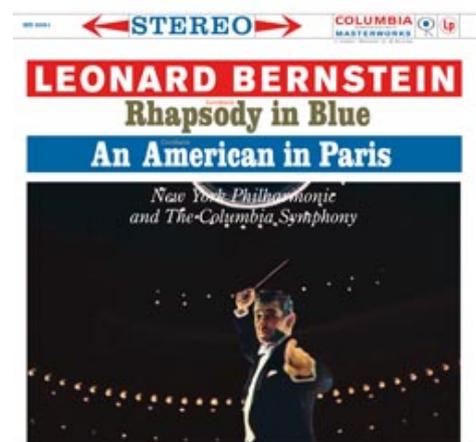
vibrant, although some of the singing isn't up to international standard. *Les Noces* combines the Russian marriage service, invocations to the Virgin and saints, sexual imagery and folklore. Some of the names used were chosen simply because of their sound, the soprano is both the bride and a goose and the groom is sometimes a tenor, sometimes a bass. In musical terms the vocal lines combine deliberately primitive declamation, motor rhythms, conversation like commentary and softer more flowing lines. The four pianos (which are played by an almost unbelievable line-up of composers) tuned and untuned percussion, offer a kaleidoscopic range of instrumental colour, rhythmic invention and when needed savage power and impetus. However despite the composers brilliant conducting the singing is again a little provincial (intentionally so?) and if it had been sung in Russian, the performance would surely be even more coruscatingly authentic. Finally there is a bright, bouncy rendition of Ragtime, a delightful soufflé of early jazz, neo-classicism, effortless melodic and rhythmic invention.

A score such as *Les Noces* is going to cause any production team big problems as they try to balance the percussion (including pianos) soloists and chorus. The CBS team seem to have placed the small chorus centrally behind the instrumentalists, the soloists are very much stage front, with the women to the left, men in the centre and right, the pianos are in the centre, but you can't tell what type of instrument is being used (grand, baby, upright) or tell them apart (the CD transfer, which might bring greater clarity at the expense of instrumental timbre, body, presence and anything else that defines an instrument, is no better) which given the stellar line-up of performers isn't good enough. Added to this there isn't any real sense of depth or exact placement, which means the four different types of side drum and xylophone are vaguely left, right etc.

Three years later in *Renard* there is more reverberation, the woodwind cut through the vocal line but as in *Les Noces* they aren't securely fixed in the aural image. Despite being recorded on the same day things improve in *Ragtime* where there is better sense of perspective, but here the centre of the image is weak in that many of the small instrumental group seem to be caught in the speakers, which is not what you expect from a recording made in 1962.

Records don't come much more iconic than the Bernstein Gershwin LP. Bernstein had only recently become the first American-born Music Director of a major American orchestra (the New York Philharmonic) triumphed on Broadway with *West Side Story* and here you him playing and conducting the music of one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest composers who was also American, for an American record label, with an LP sleeve that is now collected as a piece of art in itself.

The performances are very much what you would expect of the 40 year old Bernstein - big, bright, rhythmically alert, with plenty of expressive licence, characteristics that suit both works down to the ground. *An American in Paris* opens with Gershwin capturing the sights and sounds of the city (including car horns) where he had gone to study, and Bernstein invests the music with tremendous energy, transparency and humour. In the more relaxed central section the blues are evoked by some beautifully phrased, schmaltzy string playing and the conductor's innate grasp of rubato and tempo variation; while the final section has real swing and cumulative power. As an added bonus, the New York Philharmonic plays with virtuosity and obvious enjoyment. *Rhapsody in Blue* is one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest piano works, and here Bernstein's playing effortlessly encompasses romantic classical virtuosity, jazz and Broadway, within tempi that are quite



measured, and while Leonard Pennario and Felix Slatkin (Capitol) offer a performance of the full orchestral version with even more sweep and panache, this is still a marvellous account.

The Rhapsody was recorded in late 1957 and the famous opening clarinet glissando has presence and projection, the overall balance is slightly forward, which means that the brass are very clear (this certainly wasn't always the case in the early days of stereo) and the piano is realistically balanced, which is incredibly rare! In tutti sections there is no congestion, and the timbre of every instrument - including the piano - is beautifully caught.

Turn to An American in Paris and all of the same qualities are present, but the balance is a touch more forward, the orchestral sound has greater weight, the bass is deeper and there is less sense of depth and perspective, which gives the brass extra punch. Both recordings feature excellent string tone and dynamic range, but the treble in the Rhapsody has greater sparkle. By any standards though this is excellent sound and a big improvement on the first UK label pressing it was compared to.



Brahms wrote his first set of Liebeslieder Waltzes in 1869. The music is charming, but hardly inspired, nevertheless a surprisingly large number of stellar vocal quartets have recorded them. So how do two great pianists and a group of unknowns compare with the likes of say Edith Mathis, Brigitte Fassbaender, Peter Schreier, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Karl Engel and Wolfgang Sawallisch on DG?

In terms of the piano playing, it is beautifully scaled, legato lines are effortlessly spun and maintained, there is old-world rubato, small variations in generally forward moving tempi and immaculate pedal control. Unfortunately the singers aren't in the same class. Wayne Connor's tenor lacks body and projection and his intonation is poor; while Martial Singher's baritone is under-nourished. The women are better,

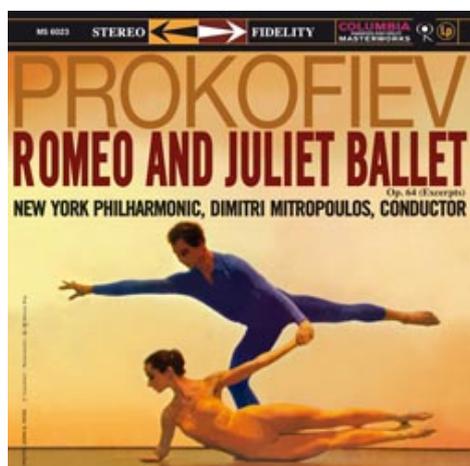
but their voices lack individuality and like the men lack the ability to project themselves.

Schubert's sublime The Shepherd on the Rock for clarinet, soprano and piano receives a better performance. Harold Wright was a great clarinetist, it goes without saying that Serkin is magnificent and by herself Benita Valente is more commanding, but turn to Margaret Price with Jack Brymer and James Lockhart (CFP LP) and you realise how two-dimensional she is and the voice isn't in the same class.

CBS didn't do too bad a job with the sound. The overall balance is middle-distance, the image has a natural sense of depth and width, being analogue, the hall acoustic is tangible and there is no excessive reverberation. In the Schubert the performers are clearly caught and locked in a realistic perspective and again being analogue the timbres of the clarinet and singer are recreated in a way that CDs cannot equal.

In the Waltzes the voices have presence and separation, but the pianos lack impact. It isn't a matter of balance - they are a reasonable distance behind the singers - rather it sounds as though a separate microphone was used, which the recording engineer turned down, which, given the quality of the playing is

Dimitri Mitropoulos's wilfully distorted changes of tempo in the Pathétique's slow introduction are unfortunate, in the main Allegro, the New York strings are weak, although he does steer a relatively straight course through the towering development, nor does he turn the codetta into a dirge. In the waltz-like second movement Mitropoulos is suitably elegiac, there is no change of tempo for the central section, but as the return of the first theme approaches the rhythm becomes four-square. Unfortunately the start of third movement march needs more definition and drive and the ensemble is awry. To his credit the Greek maestro refuses to over-emote in the concluding Adagio lamentoso, although the long crescendo in the second subject lacks intensity, more dynamic shading at piano and below wouldn't have gone amiss and like the rest of the performance the music-making is rarely inspired. His performance of Prokofiev's Romeo & Juliet is however altogether more successful.



The opening of The Montagues & Capulets is very dark, but Juliet - The Little Girl is light, but not playful enough, the Folk Dance a little subdued, and Romeo & Mercutio Masked is rhythmically staid. And yet, despite these reservations, the performance does have a rare sense of cumulative power, tension and underlying melancholy, which finds perfect expression in a stunning performance of the Balcony Scene, where the New York Philharmonic sing for Mitropoulos and in Romeo & Juliet before Parting and Friar Laurence, behind the sweeping lyrical lines the threat of impending tragedy has rarely been equalled on record. Mitropoulos ends his selection with Romeo at Juliet's Tomb, and without any sentimentality or over-statement, exquisitely delineates and captures every instrumental and emotional strand of this

sublime music.

When you listen to analogue recordings from the likes of Decca, Mercury and British Columbia, there is an identifiable label sound, but there is no such thing as the CBS sound, rather you have something of a lottery that produced everything from excellent to dreadful, so how do these releases compare with one another?

The overall balance in the Tchaikovsky is quite forward, there is a decent sense of depth, the brass are clearly audible (although the trumpets lose body in their upper register) the woodwind are reasonably clear and focused, but tend to get lost in climaxes, the timpani are powerful and crisp, but elsewhere make little impact. In terms of the string tone, the high violins are very much speaker bound and thin and the strings en masse are something of a blur. This is a pity because in the introduction the first movement Tchaikovsky often asks for the violas, cellos and double basses to be divided, not just the violins (which, alas, are not seated antiphonally) so they can play different parts and virtually nothing of this can be heard. Being analogue there is a sense

of space and acoustic, instrumental timbres are well captured, but inevitably, given this was the start of the stereo era, the dynamic range is constricted and there is an impression of, as opposed to true, deep bass.

On the Prokofiev there is excellent depth and perspective and real presence. In an ideal world the midrange would be less congested, the treble would have more sparkle, the string tone would be richer, and the brass and timpani more prominent, but this better than the Tchaikovsky if not in the same class as that provided for Bernstein in the Gershwin.