

at the words "a diletti" can this be the *maestro* himself?

Mr. Peerce seems to be unacquainted with the significance of *ppp* in "Dei miei bollenti spiriti" and all the singers fail to use a truly conversational style in what follows. Robert Merrill, as *père* Germont, describes his daughter ("Pura siccome un angelo") in booming tones that are the reverse of *dolcissimo*, *cantabile*, and he merely makes the old man more of a bore than ever.

His voice reminds me of what is called ruby port wine, a beverage that soon palls, and his rapid note groups in the duet with Violetta are roughly done. Albanese gives us some expressive singing in "Dite alla giovine," disturbed by Merrill's explosive repetitions of "piangi, piangi" and I had to turn back to the Galli Curci-De Luca recording to expunge the memory of these unpleasing sounds. But Albanese really began to move me in her cry "Alfredo tu m'ami" and she makes the great outburst following very poignant.

I shall pass over Merrill's "Di Provenza il mar" without comment and note with pleasure the accomplished singing of the two *genre* choruses in the second act. The singers are driven along by Toscanini from the sinister figure in the orchestra marked *allegro agitato* to the end of the act and the emotional temperature steadily rises. Mr. Peerce sings "Ogni suo aver tal femmina" with real conviction and, apart from a sudden fading of sound, the big chorus that ends the act is very well done.

Albanese forgets the studio completely in the last act, and now is completely inside her part (coughs and all), she reads the letter from Alfredo's father with genuine emotion, and she sings "Addio del passato" movingly. From here to the end, indeed, the three principals are excellent.

I have deliberately made little allusion until now to the conductor, but of course the opera is Toscanini's. The Preludes to the first and third acts are, as might be predicted, superbly done and when Verdi writes, as in the introduction to the first act, *Allegro brillantissimo e molto vivace*, that, and just that, is what we get. One of the finest things Toscanini does is the long *crescendo*, in the chorus after the waltz in this act, from *pp* to *ff*, a matter of eight pages of vocal score, and an example of magnificent control of chorus and orchestra.

Equally fine is the brilliant introduction to the second finale of the second act and the playing of the all-pervading figure in F minor as Alfredo gambles. At times a slight, and heretical, doubt arises as to whether the score is not somewhat overplayed for its significance: and certainly one wonders how a conductor who articulates every note with such care can tolerate anything but the most distinguished singing to match his art.

The recording, as I have said, has to deal with sound that falls dead at once and it is the orchestra that suffers most from this disadvantage, but the real point of this issue is that here for the first time we have a complete recording of an opera made by one of the greatest of living conductors: and it is for that we welcome and value it. For

this reason no comparison need be made with the excellent Columbia set, which I reviewed in THE GRAMOPHONE of February 1947.

Two matters by way of postscript. A reader kindly points out that the Valkyries sang solo lines in unison at Bayreuth, so that no blame attaches to engineers or recording for increase of tone. Finally,

since a gremlin attacks me whenever I write about *Così fan tutte*, I shall review no more records from this opera. Having prematurely married the lovers and unscrambled them, I took great pains to avoid error in reviewing Fiordiligi's *rondo-aria*, but the gremlin removed the word "sister" in the phrase "her (sister's) husband in disguise," and I was in the soup again!

## NICOLAS MEDTNER (1880-1951)

By RICHARD HOLT

THIS great musician, born in Moscow in 1880, and the last of the Russian "Old Guard," passed away at his Golders Green home on November 13th, after two years of ill-health, during most of which his beloved piano remained silent. A world figure of music, in a limited sense, for there existed a small circle of admirers in such countries as Germany, France, the United States, Canada and England, Medtner could not be said to have attained the fame his music deserved, but there were special reasons for this. Leaving Russia in 1921, his life was more or less nomadic up to 1936, when he settled in England, so that he could not become part of the musical life of any particular country. With no "C sharp minor Prelude" to spread his fame, his music, while he lived in Russia, where it was highly honoured, did not travel beyond the frontiers. Furthermore, famous pianists are very unenterprising, and do not readily learn new works, while audiences prefer the old ones. Add the fact that somebody had christened Medtner the "Russian Brahms," and you begin to understand the comparative neglect of a composer whose name is known to all, but whose music is known by few.

I first came into contact with Medtner some three years ago when I was asked to write the album notes for the recordings of his music sponsored and financed by H.H. the Maharaja of Mysore. I was not very enthusiastic because, for one thing, studying the work of a replica of another composer, Brahms, made little appeal to me, and, for another, influenced by criticisms I had read throughout the years, I imagined Medtner to be a rather dry and academic composer, mainly absorbed in abstruse counterpointal studies, in fact, the Russian Reger! The Second Piano Concerto was the main work I had to study. What then was my astonishment, after two or three hearings, to discover that it was music of rare beauty, rich imagination and nobility of feeling. Moreover, the craft of the music reminded me of Beethoven's unique skill in creating subtle combinations out of humble triads, arpeggios and the like. Here was no arid note-spinning, but vital music, and my ear was constantly delighted by felicitous touches and devices which intrigued the mind, and by lyrical feeling which moved the heart.

Successively I had to deal with the Third and First Concertos, the Sonata Vocalise, songs and piano pieces and, in the end, I came to the conclusion that Medtner's name would, one day, when it

had gained the general ear, be added to those of Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninov and one or two others, as representative of the greatest masters of the piano idiom. That the greatness—I use the word with due responsibility—of Medtner is not universally admitted to-day has no untoward significance for the full genius and greatness of Haydn also is not, nearly 150 years after his death! Listening to the symphonies of the latter, it amazes me that so much of his symphonic output is unplayed and unrecorded, and that such marvellous symphonies as *L'Imperiale*, *La Pasion*e and the *Maria Theresa* are so neglected. In the States they are recording many of these symphonies, but we are not getting them here. The public still regards Haydn as a sort of genial Cheeryble brother of music. What wonder then that the comparatively modern Medtner has not yet attained his due!

Perhaps, another fact that has militated against his recognition is his supposed antagonism to anything modern in music. I say supposed, because his hostility was to works in which the basic principles of art and music were anarchically outraged, and the legacy of the masters treated as useless; music of "senseless modulations"; and "with no centre of tonal gravity and no inter-related use of consonance and dissonance." His views on this vexed question are to be found in his book, *Muse and Mode*, which, as yet, is untranslated. In Russia, Medtner was regarded by most famous musicians as a front-rank fighter against modern extravagance and iconoclasts of the art, and on his wall hung a portrait of Alexander Glazounov, with the latter's inscription: "To a loyal defender of the sacred cause of true Art." Naturally, a composer who indulges in polemics will arouse opposition, and, in attacking the excesses of modernism, incur the risk of being labelled reactionary. It is enough to say that I have listened on the radio with Medtner to works by Britten, Vaughan Williams and others, and that he found much to praise in them, to refute such a charge.

Medtner was a man of rare intellectual

### **Majestic and Moving**

Lord, hear my prayer (Archangelsky)

Creed (Gretchaninoff)

RUSSIAN CHURCH CHOIR

HMV C 2206

gifts, but a warm heart and a keen wit prevented his intellect from dominating his art, in which emotion plays a dominant part. There are scores of passages in his concertos which overwhelm by their poignancy and depth of feeling. Simultaneous with my study of his music was the ever-deepening friendship I was privileged to contract with him. We spent many evenings together; with Mrs. Medtner, a wonder of faithful devotion and helpfulness to him, now present, then preparing a genuine Russian supper. Afterwards, we would repair to the music-room, and he would talk vividly about music and other things (for his active mind was interested in life as a whole), and perhaps, listening to records or the wireless. Some of his quietly ironic comments were highly amusing. Referring to a noted modern composer, he declared that he orchestrated his music first and composed it afterwards. One comment, on the multiplicity of "famous" composers to-day, I recall: "when I was a young man," he declared, "there was a mere handful of composers, to-day there appears to be a whole telephone-directory of them."

After his sad illness began, he could only live downstairs, and piano-playing (which was the breath of life to him) and even listening to music were barred. Sometimes, when some improvement manifested itself, he would come to a seat, about a hundred yards distant from his house, and wait for me, waving his stick as I came into sight. We would sit for a while, and then he would take my arm and we would return. It saddened me deeply to see him thus, and I knew how infinitely trying it must be for him to live without music, a man who was music in himself. Now he is gone, and I feel something precious has passed from my world. But something precious remains, his wonderful music, of which, thanks to the great gesture of a cultured music lover in far-off India, four whole albums, and two separate issues, remain for the delight of those who have learned the quality of it.

Medtner's art is original in the truest sense (witness the ever-delightful *Fairy-Tales*). He used to say the "greatest originality was to create a new atmosphere by familiar materials," and that he has done. As Ernest Newman wrote, in the '20s, "In a day when 'alities' of every kind seem to be running mad, Medtner calmly goes on demonstrating the nonsense of the theory that the resources of the old tonality are exhausted." Medtner was not a Russian Brahms; he was essentially Russian, and I recall how delighted he was, when, after I had become familiar with his music, I spoke of what I considered its emphatic Russian quality. "You understand my music well," he said.

Medtner wrote some sixty-one works (or Opus numbers) and in every one the piano is used. His name will live, therefore, primarily, as a composer for that instrument. The orchestra, in his three concertos, however, is employed skilfully and expressively. His songs, exhibiting an impeccable regard for the text, are masterly, and he must take a high place in this

respect. The rhythmic element in his music is outstanding, but, apart from technical considerations, it is its spiritual and human attributes which make it so significant.

If I end by stating that I consider Beethoven's to be the greatest mind in music (as particularly exemplified by the last quartets), and that my favourite composers are Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, Haydn, Mozart, Mahler, Bruckner, Elgar, Verdi, Ravel, Liszt and a few others, it is merely with the hope of gaining the reader's confidence in my claim to possess some taste in music, and so, perhaps, to make him attach some value to my considered opinion, that the music of Nicolas Medtner deserves to rank amongst the richest treasures of the art. Thanks to the generosity of H.H. the Maharaja of Mysore, and to the work of H.M.V. and Columbia much of his music is now available for us to enjoy.

## COLLECTORS' CORNER

Conducted By JOHN FREESTONE

The H.M.V. Archive series has naturally created a considerable stir in the collecting world, and I have received a great deal of correspondence on the subject. Generally speaking, the reaction of the majority of collectors seems to be one of gratitude to the company concerned for making these "pieces" available. However, many correspondents have pointed out innumerable errors in the dates given in the printed list, and also some quite unnecessary mistakes, such as the labelling of V.B.40 (**Adelina Patti**—*La Calesera* and **Nellie Melba**—*Porgi Amor*). The speed in both cases is given as 78, which is certainly too high for the Melba, and most of the Patti should play at 76. Again the label states that the Melba side is accompanied by orchestra, whereas it is quite obviously with piano.

Two letters have suggested that the price charged for the discs is too high, but I would point out that the issue of these records is not likely to be a very paying proposition in any case, for the demand is bound to be small, and the recognition of the collector by the Gramophone Company is a step in the right direction, at any rate. I understand that in the case of some artists, the question of royalties, when discs are re-issued, creates considerable difficulties.

As most readers will know, the majority of the re-issued discs were first ordered for subscription issue in the U.S.A., and consequently the choice was governed by the demand among American collectors. This has caused some surprising omissions, from the English collector's point of view. For example, there are no records of **Tamagno**, **Calvé**, **Pareto**, **Eames**, or **Sembrich** (solos). No doubt the company will add further titles as time goes on, provided the first issue is a success, and I think the following would meet with the general approval of collectors:

Tamagno—any, but particularly the "Otello" extracts, since they are creator's recordings.  
Patti—*La Serenata* (Tosti), No. 03079; *Pur dieesti* (Lotti), No. 03052.  
De Lucia—*Ecco ridente in cielo*, No. 052078.  
De Lucia and Boninsegna—*Tarda si fa*, No. 054043.

### Recorded Works of Nicolas Medtner

Album of Pianoforte Works, played by the Composer. H.M.V. DB3003-8.

### Mysore Foundation of Music Records

Album I:

*Piano Concerto in C minor*, Op. 50, No. 2;  
*Fairy Tale in D minor*, Op. 51, No. 1;  
*Arabesque in A minor*, Op. 7, No. 2.  
Songs: *To a Dreamer*, Op. 32, No. 6;  
*Spanish Romance*, Op. 52, No. 5;  
*The Butterfly*, Op. 28, No. 3.

Album II:

*Piano Concerto (Ballade) in E minor* No. 3,  
Op. 60; *Improvisation*, Op. 31, No. 1;  
*Sonata Vocalise*, Op. 41.

Album III:

*Piano Concerto No. 1 in C minor* No. 1,  
Op. 33. Songs: *The Ravens*, Op. 52,  
No. 2; *I cannot hear the birds sing*, Op. 28,  
No. 2. *Canzona Mattinata*, Op. 39, No. 4;  
*Sonata Tragica*, Op. 39, No. 5.

Selection of Songs, sung by Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (soprano) with Medtner (piano). Columbia LX1423-6.

Calvé—*Ma Lisette* and *Le Printemps*, No. 033054; "Carmen"—*Les tringles des sœurs tintaient*, No. 033058.

Lilli Lehmann—Two arias from "Il Seraglio" (These are Odeon masters, but they are, I believe, still available, and there seems to be no reason why they should not be issued, under the appropriate label.)

Maurel—Any, but particularly the "Otello" and "Falstaff" excerpts. (As with Lehmann, the records would presumably be issued with Odeon labels. The masters, I believe, are still preserved.)

Of course the list could be expanded almost indefinitely, but I have mentioned just a few recordings which would almost certainly meet with wide approval. However, at the moment, most of us no doubt have earmarked far more of the new H.M.V. issues for our own personal "archives" than our purses can cope with.

As a collector of originals, I would much prefer a red G. & T. of **Boronat** to one of the new white label pressings, but as the former are becoming rarer and rarer, the latter form a very welcome means of hearing some of the great voices of the past. Meanwhile the owners of original copies need not worry unduly. It has been proved over and over again that the re-issue of great rarities does not materially affect the value of the originals.

### CREATOR'S DISCS

By GORDON WHELAN

Most readers of "Collectors' Corner" are in possession of a copy of "Historical Records," by Robert Bauer of Milan, or at least, have read this monumental work on early recordings. In this book are listed many creators' recordings from operas, sung by such famous singers as **Melba**, **Caruso**, **Tamagno**, **Maurel**, etc. Most of these discs are too well known by all collectors for me to bring them to your notice again in this article. However, I think it would be of great interest to you all to mention other important creators' recordings, which, for various reasons, are not mentioned in the Bauer "Historical Records." That list stops at recordings, after 1911-12, and does not