

# HP's WORKSHOP

## The Golden Dozen LPs

### CAT STEVENS: *TEA FOR THE TILLERMAN*.

Island Records ILPS 9135

At the peak of his career, Stevens, who once used big Magneplanners to check the sound of his sessions—and you really should hear his discs on such, if only for the midbass transients—made a string of superb-sounding recordings. They were always a bit more luscious and magical on the Island imports from Britain than on domestic A&Ms. Their number must also include *Catch Bull at Four*, *Mona Bone Jakon* (a genuine disaster in the American pressing), and *Teaser and the Firecat*. On *Tea*, you have a capacious studio sound and a genuine soundstage, sounding as if cut from the whole cloth. Stevens is, of course, dead center, and the slight edge of his upper registers provides a nearly perfect instrument for correctly setting a cartridge's vertical tracking. Too much edge and it's too high; not enough—that is, marshmallow—and it's too low. Acoustic guitars, strings, a closely-miked string bass, and the backup singers allow an interplay in that continuous space. The effect is involving and lovely to the ear. This would all be for naught if the songs were the uninspired stuff he's singing today, but here you have "Wild World," "Hard-Headed Woman," "Miles from Nowhere." Sonic standouts, with both wide dynamic and frequency response and no little dramatic impact. On a personal note, I didn't know back when that "Sad Lisa" was a song about a seriously disturbed young woman in a mental institution. And I find undertones in some of the songs I hadn't been aware of until I start re-listening to the top LPs. Certainly his early work has stood time's test. And just who makes better-sounding popular recordings nowadays?

### RIMSKY-KORSAKOV: *SCHEHERAZADE*.

Reiner (cond.), Chicago Symphony. RCA LSC 2446 and Classic Records 33 and 45 rpm re-issues

Here is an unusual instance where the first RCA pressings of a disc were far from the best. Inside the LP circles frequented by the cognoscenti, there is much ado over the stamper number—on the free space between grooves and label. With RCA initial Living Stereo releases, it's normally the discs with a "1s" number (first stamper) that are the ones to have (and cost the most). But in this case, as well as with the first-generation Reiner *Pictures at an Exhibition*, the first was far from pristine. I didn't consider the sound of the Reiner *Scheherazade* exceptional until I heard a latter-day pressing (the so-called "White Dog" with a plain red label and large white RCA letters). Then I thought: Wow! Having said that, don't expect flawlessness. Even in Classic Records' far more revealing remasterings, you'll hear engineer Lewis Layton's obvious compression of the great climax in the fourth movement—the shipwreck, with its gong, bass drum, and orchestra driven hard

by Reiner. No big deal, I say. In the heyday of early stereo discs, compressed dynamics were common, especially on some Reiner RCAs, even though Layton was obviously pushing to get the maximum onto the tape—to wit, the Reiner *Lt. Kije*, where overload distortion long prevented my putting the recording in the top tier. I wish I could spend several paragraphs pointing out felicities in the interpretation. The second movement is just ravishing in the beauty of the Chicago's playing and Reiner's romantic approach; there is some staccato triple-tonguing done by trumpeter Adolph Herseth in the fourth movement that should leave you, if not him, breathless. But let it just be said that, after you hear this, no other *Scheherazade* will ever replace it in your affections (true also of Reiner's *Kije* and *Pines of Rome*).

### BACHARACH: *CASINO ROYALE (SOUNDTRACK)*.

Colgems COSO 5005

I suggest you move mountains to find an original pressing, such as the 3s, though none is too far away from perfect. The search will be no small task, thanks to film-music collectors, who are completists and must have every last recording of every last soundtrack, regardless of musical merit. There were times when *Casino* originals have sold for something like \$1500 at then-fancy Manhattan LP salons. Me? I've hoarded multiple copies from Day One and now mostly never play them except as an acid test for a component's musical truth. There are tales of the irreparable damage done to the original tape by an inexperienced technician in charge of a transfer for a Varese/Saraband remastering. Somehow Mike Hobson, prexy of Classic Records, has come up with an alternate copy of the original—I can't get the whole story out of him, despite Scheharrazade intellectual blandishments. Classic's is good, but missing the ineffable extra dollop of magic that distinguishes the Colgems LP. But if you must, you must. Trouble is Classic's best version is its DAD (a 96/24 transfer not usable on normal CD machines). Hobson did release a single disc of the inimitable Dusty Springfield's seductive "Look of Love," the highlight of the album, with both a 33 and a 45 rpm side, the latter containing enough of the spine-tingling quality of her reading to enchant you ultra-romantics out there. On the LP, the sound varies from cut to cut, making it close to an ideal test recording. When I say "varies," I don't mean in quality, but rather it's as if the engineer, Jack Clegg, was experimenting with multimiking strategies—wonderful for our reviewing purposes. Listen carefully, for example, and you'll hear Dusty in a not-obvious isolation booth during "Look"—she had a bad case of nerves, it is said—and the orchestra in a different acoustic, one in which all sort of delicacies of sound are committed. Oh yes, it was produced by Phil Ramone.

**BRITTEN: PRINCE OF THE PAGODAS.****Britten (cond.), Covent Garden Orchestra.  
Ace of Diamonds GOS 558-9 (two discs)**

This is another disc worth searching out, and, as I write, not impossible, with a bit of Internet sleuthing, to find at fair prices, especially in England. Ace of Diamonds is a low-priced Decca line, one where the quality is not skimmed. Decca has not, to my knowledge, ever reissued this (not unlike the completely awesome Head recording of Gerhard's *The Plague*, also on English Decca). A suite of its best numbers has been recently recorded, but in tin-eared sound on Chandos for poor Leonard Slatkin, who had no say over the engineering. (Have the brothers Couzens had earball burnout?) I cannot imagine the set being sonically bettered by today's engineers. It is quite difficult to do justice, verbally, to the Cinemascope stage dimensions or the articulated definition and lucent qualities of the sound to those who haven't heard a bit of it, so distinctive and singular is the presentation.

Composer Britten is leading the house orchestra of the Covent Garden Opera House. The playing is a bit ragged at times, but not so much so that it will put you off Britten's interpretation of his own ballet, a three-act work that is not all on the same level of inspiration. (The work wasn't publicly played until 1957.) The soundstage dimensions here are huge, but "huge" in the way of the real thing, and instruments are so deployed (even those off-stage) and sound so focused that this becomes a first-rate demonstration disc, also a test of the accuracy of your VTA adjustment and overall top-to-bottom system balance. It can sound quite bright otherwise. There is a mighty bass drum at several points, some lush Balinese-like harmonics during one of the dances done by the four Kings, and the full use of a modern orchestra's coloristic possibilities, all in a rather dark-sounding hall (not unlike Walthamstow). If I have a mind to show visiting potentates how close to reality a system can sound, this is one of the best discs to use, since it is of a single sonic texture. Side One is the one to hear, and especially those four dances done by the Kings of the East, West, South, and North. If you last through all four sides, you've got me beat, unless of course you suffer from insomnia.

**RACHMANINOFF: PIANO CONCERTO NO. 3.****Bryon Janis (piano), Antal Dorati (cond.),  
London Symphony Orchestra. Mercury SR-90283**

The original Everest label, which came into existence in the late 1950s aiming for the most impressive high-tech state-of-the-art sound, got the drop on everyone in the Manhattan recording mafia when it introduced recording on 35mm film, instead of solely on tape. While the big labels, RCA and Columbia didn't bite, others in the intensely competitive New York recording community did, and bit hard, including Enoch Light at Project 3 and Command, and especially Robert Fine at Mercury. Command did the far better selling job, and Mercury the better engineering job. Mercury had the better stable of artists (Fennell, Paray, and Dorati), while Command was only able to wrestle up an ailing William Steinberg of the Pittsburgh. Oh yes, the advantages of 35mm: less distortion; greater dynamic range; no chance of print-through; zero flutter; and so forth. One thing that no reviewer has been able to do is directly compare the sound of a 35mm recording with that of 30 ips (or 15, for that matter)

tape, for lack of playback equipment and access to the tapes and the 35mm originals. Wilma Cozart Fine, Mercury's recording director, has told me that the sound, particularly in the high frequencies, between film and tape is quite different. Fine was not forthcoming about which of the two she preferred. (And so we must be left to guess.)

The Rachmaninoff was the first recording her husband, Robert, recorded on film; and on the LP, the sound is silken. It is one of the greatest recordings of the past century. It was made at Watford Town Hall, a site whose glorious acoustic properties Mercury made famous. And it was recorded before Janis suffered the affliction that made him withdraw from performing for decades. There were few pianists with his prestidigital skills and none who drew the same amount of electricity and soul from this excruciatingly difficult concerto. (Some of you are going to hate me for this, but an astrological word: Janis, Dorati, Rachmaninoff, and Fine, the recording director, are all Aries, so to me it's no wonder that this Third breathes such fire and a nearly ineffable romanticism.)

Weirdly enough, when Fine got a chance to re-do the classic Mercury stereo issues for Philips on CD, she and the Dutch found that the original 35mm master had been "lost," perhaps misplaced. They had to use a copy. Fine's CD transfers, even 15 years later, are as good as such come, so you could compare disc and CD to see what you think of the differences in the top octave, giving upfront a small edge to analog's felicities with harmonics. The disc has a few problems toward the end of a quite crowded second side, with the final rollicking stampede to the climax giving even the best cartridges the heebie-jeebies. But, I say, so what. If you can find it, get it.

**RESPIGHI: THE PINES OF ROME.****Reiner (cond.); Chicago Symphony.****RCA LSC 2446; Classic 33 and four-record 45 rpm set**

Released early in the stereo LP era (1960), this monumental interpretation of the *Pines* caused pickup arm/cartridge combos to severely mistrack during the climatic march into Rome (which Reiner made sound like the fascistas of modern times rather than the legions of old; he was Hungarian, you know) and RCA recut the disc, and cut out its heart by taming and emasculating the huge groove swings. It thus made the original 1s pressing one of the most cherished among sophisticated audiophile collectors. (Let it be said, though, that the best systems of 1960 could track a 1s.) To this, the definitive reading, Reiner brought a special intensity and sensuality. Reiner, his Chicago Symphony, and the RCA team of Layton and Mohr were at their respective peaks. The Classic Records 45 four-disc recut of the works smooths out some of the rough spots we thought inherent in the recording. It is some sort of comment upon technological progress to say that a recording nearly a half century old still sounds fresh and pushes the limits of the LP cutting art to the extreme. And just dripping gorgeous on all counts.

## GERHARD: *THE PLAGUE*.

**Dorati (cond.); McCowen (narrator); National Symphony Orchestra & Chorus. Decca Headline Head 6**

*The Plague* has been on my Super Disc list since I first heard it. I know of no other recording that better illustrates all the strengths of Decca/London's engineering team than this one, thanks to the superb balance between a single narrator, an enormous chorus, and the National Symphony all working in a huge (but not overblown) acoustic setting. It's Dorati again at the podium and Alex McCowen as Camus' (almost matter-of-fact) narrator of *The Plague*, which itself steals into and weaves a black death throughout the city. This disc is particularly chilling to hear with the lights low: hissing sounds and whispered sighs from the chorus; lightly plucked bows for the masses of rats; a formidable bass drum with sudden outbursts of percussion; and one of the most chilling effects, the solo sound of a dying rat. It is the genius of conductor and engineers that all of this is woven into a coherent tapestry and that it is spectacularly effective on both senses and minds. For all of its supposedly "modern" compositional touches, this work achieves a freedom from its effects, rising above the temporal in its dramatic impact.

## ARNOLD: *DANCES—ENGLISH, SCOTTISH AND CORNISH*.

**Arnold (cond.), London Philharmonic Orchestra. Lyrita SRCS-109**

Lyrita recorded a slew of British composers, with the legendary Kenneth Wilkinson at the engineering console in London's Abbey Road studios, as a rule. The composers range from the well-known (to classical buffs), like Elgar, to the relatively obscure, Ireland, Bax, Finzi, and Howell, to name a few. The series recordings are about as good as they come, although they never have achieved the legendary status of, say, a Mercury Living Presence or even a Decca Headline. The Arnold disc is, like the Britten *Pagodas*, as close to real as analog encoding got in its British hey-day. Arnold, as a composer, was essentially a colorist who never met an interesting harmonic he didn't like or use, and these dances are at the peak of his inspiration and compositional power. Despite this, his works have a "signature" that reveals its author. These pieces are fun to listen to, and never wear out their welcome, so compact are they. All eight of the *English Dances* are in a class by themselves, and sonic knockouts. You can hear the studio's wooden walls (and relatively short decay time when the big bass drum is hit). In this case, the short decay and neutral acoustic (no darkness here) breathe extra life into the transients, but never extra brightness or harshness, unless your system (or cartridge) is doing one of its cuckoo numbers. For instance, check out that decay on the big gong. There is a catch—isn't there usually? Some of the pressings were made by Decca—they are of thicker vinyl—and these sound the best; others farmed out to Philips (I believe) don't have the ineluctable sense of "life" and transient purity of the Decca-done pressings. If anyone can enlighten me about the appropriate stamper numbers, I'll be glad to pass along the info when I get it (hpsaudiomall@aol.com).

## BERNARD HERRMANN: *THE THREE WORLDS OF GULLIVER (FROM THE MYSTERIOUS FILM WORLD OF BERNARD HERRMANN.)*

**Herrmann (cond.), National Philharmonic. Decca PFS 4337**

For sheer exhilaration, few film scores surpass the one from *Gulliver* (the listing on the label, not the title of the piece). And what a glorious sound Decca's Arthur Lilley graced the orchestral score with, in all its (tasteful) multimiked glory. (Two other films are more briefly represented here, a bit from Herrmann's *Mysterious Island* and *Jason and the Argonauts*, but alas not its famous and influential percussive "living" skeletons' attack.) Herrmann's score leans heavily on contrasts between exotic colorations, from masses of high percussion (ah, those xylophones), to the thunderous weight of the string bass and bass drum. In between there is a bit of everything else in the highest composition color you can think of (but for such an unimaginative and soporific retelling of the Swift original, whose satiric edge you'll hear in Herrmann's orchestration but not see in the film itself. Zzzzz.). An indispensable disc.

## THE WEAVERS AT CARNEGIE HALL. THE WEAVERS.

**Vanguard Stereolab VSD 2150; also Classic Records 4-disc 45 rpm set (now out of print, alas)**

## BELAFONTE AT CARNEGIE HALL. HARRY BELAFONTE, ET AL.

**RCA LSO-6006 (two discs); also Classic Records, 2-disc 33 remastering and an 8-disc 45 rpm set**

I suppose you might call it a purely personal choice, but I thought I should keep, among the select discs here, one or two actually recorded in New York's Carnegie Hall. Sad to say not many recordings (of unamplified music) were made there, one of the world's great acoustic venues, perhaps because of the rumble of subways running beneath (which never stopped the Decca and EMI engineers from recording in Kingsway and other rumble-prone London venues). Mercury recorded its Bartók Violin Concerto in Carnegie in the late 1950s, but took care to record at night when fewer trains were running, and even obtaining the subway schedules to time breaks. But the Bartók was the first Mercury stereo disc, and issued before the 45/45 cutting system matured.

The Weavers disc, in both the Vanguard issue and particularly in the Classic remastering, not only captures the sound of the hall (N.B., "Goodnight Irene") but also the sound of an audience in that hall. The delicate sound of the acoustic instruments, or rather their plucked transients, and the rough-hewn (mostly) vocalizing, the singers spread wide across the stage, all make more of a test than you might at first think. Then there is RCA's live Harry Belafonte recording, in which there is even more interaction between the singer, the audience, and the hall's special acoustic(s). (There are balance problems in the miking of the orchestral backup.)

If future historians want to know how Carnegie sounded during its prime years, the cut they will turn to is "Matilda," which closes the album. Belafonte, like a choir director in a southern church, gets different sections of the audience to participate in a call/response sing-along. He starts with the most expensive seats down



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front and moves back, each time farther away from the stage and the mikes, and so providing an exact replica of Carnegie's acoustic delays. This illustrates the differences acoustically between, say, the orchestra seats and the upper balconies. He manages, with no little wit, to have some fun with this—those in the highest balcony are “people on scholarships”—this after shushing the orchestra because of the inconjunction between the “call” and “response.” At another point, he asks to hear “women over 40,” to near dead silence and then much laughter. When he coaxes them once again, they sound very much over 40 and well out of tune, more peals of laughter, and applause everywhere. There is a wealth of detail revealed in the Classic remasterings that, despite my reservations about some of the balances, show why analog has charms to soothe the savage breast. And it provides a historical record of one of the hall's most famous moments.

### **STRAVINSKY: THE FIREBIRD.**

#### **Antal Dorati (cond.), London Symphony Orchestra. Mercury SR-90266 and Classic 3-disc 45 rpm set**

Recorded by Robert Fine in 1959, *The Firebird* is, perhaps, the best-sounding large-scale orchestral recording that Mercury made (and that's saying a platterful)—a supreme testament to the virtues of Fine's purist, three-mike recording technique. The LSO's string tone is so ravishingly beautiful here that it truly deserves to be called “diaphanous,” and unlike many of

Mercury's Dorati/Minnesota recordings bass is so tight, clear, and well-defined that the cello and doublebass ostinatos on the second side can be used as a test of loudspeaker bass articulation. On top of this, the record is sensationally dynamic on fortissimos and just as sensationally delicate on pianissimos.

On the Mercury recording, we have Dorati, a master of ballet scores and no slouch with early Stravinsky, finally working with an orchestra worthy of his talents, and in an acoustic environment, Watford Town Hall (or Colosseum in local usage) worthy of Mercury's engineers. Robert Fine and company had to resort to tricks to minimize the dryness of the Northrop acoustic back in Minneapolis. Here there was no such limitation. I really prefer the three-disc 45 rpm set from Classic, which was overseen by the formidable Wilma Cozart Fine, the original recording director at the session, and the person who forced mastering engineer Bernie Grundman to use tubed amplifiers to cut the six discs she redid for Classic (such a shame that they, quite unexpectedly, weren't the sellers Mike Hobson had anticipated). What sounded almost unbearable bright on the single disc LP, just sounded as an orchestra sounds up close when hitting those huge fortissimos.

**TAS**