

MUSICAL CANADIANS ON RECORD

Boris Hambourg and Redferne Hollinshead, who have both been before the Sound Film-graph in New York, find it a Tough Proposition

ANY musical aspirant for earthly immortality in music might drop a line of inquiry to Boris Hambourg, the Russo-Anglo-Canadian 'cellist virtuoso, head of the Hambourg Conservatory. Boris has had ten years of intermittent record-making. His first was in London. His second instalment was in New York. There have been no others. Boris has played considerable of a repertoire for these reproducing machines. Some of his best known are: Schumann's "Traumerel," Popper's "Papillon," Massenet's "Elegie," and several of my own compositions.

Perhaps you have never heard him in actuality. If so, you will not need to be told that he ranks among the half dozen headliners for the 'cello at present living; that he has for years been a sort of discoverer on his instrument; that he has dug up a number of rare old masterpieces germane to the 'cello, and has a sort of natural affinity for all the lyric material belonging to that instrument. He is the master of an exceedingly brilliant style, both in tone and technique. Sometimes he almost violinizes on the 'cello, believing that the near-bass instrument never was meant to be always groping among the indigos and the blacks.

Now, that is a fortunate circumstance for his playing of records. Next to the bass viol the 'cello is probably the hardest string instrument to transmit to a record, because of its native sombreness of tone in the lower register. Boris, one imagines, would approach the torture-chamber of the record machine with perfect poise.

"At my ease?" he repeated to the Courier interviewer, who tried to work the record game on him another way. "In front of that dastardly funnel poking its maw out of a curtain as genially as a Long Tom? No, no. I was never at ease. I was always as nervous as—"

He paused for need of a true American simile.

"As a cat on a clothes-line?" suggested the questioner.

"Exactly! You have struck it."

"More nervous than in front of a crowd or a critical small audience?"

"Infinitely. A crowd inspires you. A critical audience challenges the best you have. A blank curtain and a funnel and the operator behind remind me very much of something I hope never to experience—"

"Electrocution, I suppose?"

He smiled.

"Conditions for record-making are bad," he continued. "I don't know how artists in other lines find it. But for me there is absolutely no inspiration in playing for records. Nothing but nervousness."

"Which is happily obscured in the reproduction?"

"Perhaps. I hope so. I believe if the room were below zero I should be mopping my face when I get through a record. You see, there is nothing to pick you up. Once you are off to a good start you may keep it. And you may not. There is nothing to produce any climax in feeling. You force yourself through a piece like travelling uphill. There is no momentum. The room is empty. The funnel glares out as though it were hungry enough to swallow you 'cello and all, and you know quite well that the least deviation in technic or tonality will be recorded as religiously by that unsympathetic machine as a film camera brings out the defects of a man in action or the genius of an actor."

"But then, of course, it records also the perfect tone, the faultless technique—"

"Ah! Not so fast. You have never performed for a funnel and a curtain and an operator, have you?"

"Never."

"Then let me inform you that when you do you are not conscious of any mastery of virtuosoship. You are nothing but a criminal on trial. You feel like a culprit. Left to your own devices you would play but one piece, and its title would be—Fiasco. But, of course, in sheer desperation you refuse to be conquered by the cold genius of science. You make yourself believe that pure art was in the world before science was out of its cradle. You whip yourself along and sweat and do your best to develop a careless abandon such as one sometimes feels before a crowd. Presently, before you feel that you have succeeded in doing anything but the ugliest thing you ever did, the trial is over."

"And of course you can go back again if the result doesn't suit you?"

"Fortunately, yes. I should be sorry to have anybody but myself hear some of the trial records I have made. Honestly, I have felt sometimes like running away."



Redferne
Hollinshead
is now
located
musically in
New York.

Boris
Hambourg
playing on
his new
\$10,000
Montenagna
for the
record
machine in
New York.

trembling, such as I have never known, even before the largest and most critical audiences, I entered the trial rooms, realizing that I was facing an entirely new experience. To say the least, the smiling suavity of the manager, and his courteous assistant, could do but very little to assure me that the ordeal was not to be a most fearsome experience.

I was instructed to keep the voice as steady as possible and sustain a clear, pure tone. I well remember that the trial song was Liddle's "A Farewell," one of my favourite concert songs. How I succeeded in surviving the trial I don't remember; but eventually I was escorted into the next room to hear the worst, as I thought. The worst turned out to be my trial record in what is technically termed "the rough"; and rough it certainly was. The aim at these trials seems to be to reproduce the voice under the most unfavourable conditions; and if these are surmounted successfully, it can be expected to excel under the most favourable ones of the regular process.

The trial consists of standing before and singing into a large horn, which leads into a cylindrical record of soft wax, rapidly revolving in a brass support, much like the ordinary cylinder phonograph. An attendant with guiding hand on my shoulder would gently draw me back while singing a loud, high note, and push me forward while singing piano or mezzo-forte passages. I was warned against tremolo, and enjoined to pay special attention to diction.

After an extremely nervous time of it, I listened to my voice for the first time, and felt as if I had seen a ghost. The manager jocosely remarked on my pallor and cold perspiration as I listened to the notes of a voice that was entirely different from anything I had dreamed of.

I was very pessimistic, I remember, and expected that

my trial would prove a dismal failure. Judge as to my surprise and joy, however, when a letter reached me offering a contract to sing a large number of records, for my trial had been accepted.

Soon after this, I went to New York to make my first records. They were to be cylindrical ones, and if satisfactory I was to become promoted to the disc.

In making my first contract records, the conditions were much better. Instead of a pianist, I had a splendid orchestral accompaniment, under the leadership of an experienced, highly capable conductor. The individual and collective excellence of such an organization cannot help but lend inspiration to a singer.

The room in which these records were made was also different from the trial room. Very bare and devoid of upholstery of all kinds, it was just a simple, ordinary room, apparently, but so arranged that the tones of voice and orchestra were directed acoustically into one corner, wherein was built a partition which led into another smaller "sanctum sanctorum." Through this partition emerged a large metal horn, and grouped around it in a semi-circle were the raised platform and chairs for the orchestra.

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Boris spoke with true native modesty. He was simply giving his impressions of the experience as faithfully as the machine recorded its impressions of him. Much of his early dread of the record machine has gone with experience. But he is convinced that it will never be obliterated under present conditions.

"Have you any suggestions for tyros?" he was asked.

"Above all things an even and a true tone," he said.

"Avoid extreme pianissimos and never force the tone. Relax as much as possible."

Hollinshead's Experiences

OF all the eerie, uncanny thrills of which the human system is capable, I know of nothing so demoralizing to composure as the sensation which attends the hearing of one's voice, re-created on a phonograph record.

Having received notice that T. A. Edison was desirous of procuring a trial record of my voice, I went to New York and visited the Recording Department of his great Phonograph Company. With fear and