

Outstanding classical releases

1974's best from classics, jazz and rock

By IAN BALFOUR

The scarcity of vinyl and spiralling costs have yet to affect the classical recording industry's production. Recordings of standard repertoire works are becoming legion and the range of recorded classical music is increasing steadily. In attempting to wade through the sea of recordings of the past year, one turns to the catalogues of the labels which offer the finest, most consistent performances.

Deutsche Grammophon is outstripping all its competitors in many ways. Their recordings feature not only virtually all of the great conductors and orchestras of Europe but they have also gathered some of most promising young talent under their wing.

The recording event of the year is undoubtedly the issue of the massive 99 record set of the works of J.S. Bach on Archiv Records, the musical history division of Deutsche Grammophon. Archiv's careful scholarship and unmatched recording quality combine to produce the most definitive and satisfying Bach recordings.

If Deutsche Grammophon was responsible for the finest recordings of the year, Karl Boehm played the most decisive role in their recent successes. One would expect that Boehm, who recently became an octogenarian, would have passed the twilight of his career. Judging by his recordings and the several performances which I was fortunate to watch him conduct this past year, however, he shows no signs of slowing down.

Here is a list then (by no means exhaustive) of the finest classical records I have heard during 1974.

1. The Early Days: Historic Recordings 1913-32 (DGG) A valuable historical document with very important recordings, such as Nikisch's version of Beethoven's Fifth from 1913, Strauss' versions of his own Don Juan and Mozart's Fortieth, as well as Furtwaengler's excerpts from Tristan and Isolde and Mendelssohn's overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream. The sound is vastly superior to most "historical recordings" which are

unlistenable after several playings.

2, 3, and 4. Karl Boehm's recordings of Beethoven's Symphonies No. 9, 7, and 3 (all DGG). These single releases from the boxed set of the Anniversary Edition establish Boehm as the most eloquent Beethoven interpreter of his day. The Ninth, the most sublime of symphonies and a great challenge to any conductor, is a triumph. Boehm's readings of the Seventh and Third symphonies are equally well-conceived and supported by the Vienna Philharmonic's highly-praised strings and the capable and underrated horn section.

5. The Solti Showcase. (London) Though obviously designed to be a commercial success, this release of Solti and Chicago Symphony is also an artistic one. The album is composed of five short symphonic works of four composers and gives Solti ample room to demonstrate his versatility. Solti's emphasis on horns in the Third Leonore Overture is unconventional and provocative.

6. The Abduction From the Seraglio. Karl Boehm (DGG) A superb collection of the famous Mendelssohn works for solo piano. Barenboim's reading is articulate and immensely listenable. One might have thought his preoccupation with conducting would detract from his piano playing, but not in this case.

8. The Rite of Spring. Sir George Solti. (London) An intelligent and sensitive reading of the Stravinsky score. At times Solti's precision is worthy of Toscanini. Flawless playing by the Chicago Symphony.

9. The Rite of Spring. Michael Tilson Thomas (DGG) A fresh, exciting interpretation by the Wunderkind of American conducting. Still in his twenties, Thomas should be the premiere conductor of his generation.

10. Kinertotenlieder. Fisher-Dieskau and Boehm (DGG) An emotion-filled but controlled reading of the exquisite Mahler songs by the world's best baritone.

Reading Billboard, the recording industry's trade magazine, is a very depressing, albeit en-

lightening, experience. The final issue of the year includes sales and popularity charts of every popular music category conceivable. If there is one rule of thumb to evaluate these charts by, it is that talent is in inverse proportion to success. Most of the albums listed below were not great commercial successes.

Several trends characterized this year's recordings. One of the more unfortunate ones evolved from the series of groups spawned by the talented, if pretentious, British rock group, Yes. Many groups attempted to echo Yes' relatively sophisticated music. The complicated rhythms of Yes became confused and meaningless in the hands of less talented groups and the lyrics became more cryptic and inane than ever.

Another stream of popular music is running in the nebulous area between rock and jazz drawing on both traditions. Chick Corea is the darling of this new idiom with his Return To Forever group. Jazz purists are not impressed by it, but it is very effective and deserves most of the commercial success it has gained.

Among the year's "greatest hits" albums, including Santana, the Grateful Dead, and John Denver, the worst was the two-album set from the Moody Blues which might have been called The Best of Junior High School Philosophy For Rock Group and Mellotron, but wasn't.

Here are my choices for the best jazz and rock albums of the year:

1. Keith Jarrett, Solo Concerts (ECM-Polydor 1035-37). This three record set is absolutely the finest non-classical recording I have heard. Jarrett's piano improvisations are staggering in scope and flawless in execution. His superb senses of melody and rhythm combine to form the most lyrical and compelling music being recorded these days.

2. Chick Corea and Gary Burton,

Crystal Silence (ECM-Polydor 1024). Pianist Corea and vibraphonist Burton combine to produce a very beautiful album under the expert production of Mandred Eicher. Performing mainly Corea and Steve Swallow compositions, the rapport between the two musicians is excellent.

3. Gary Burton, The New Quartet (ECM-Polydor 1030). Burton found an amazing substitute for bassist Steve Swallow in Abraham Laboriel. Michael Goodrick on guitar and Harry Blazer on drums provide more than adequate support on a well-executed album of varied compositions.

4. McCoy Tyner, Echoes of A Friend (Milestone M-9055). Though Tyner has a number of solo albums to his credit, it is primarily through his work with John Coltrane that he has gained prominence. This Coltrane inspired album of piano solos includes the classic Naima and a version of My Favourite Things which will erase Julie Andrews from your memory. Inspired playing in the spirit of the master.

5. Ron Carter, All Blues (CTI P698). A fine album of classical jazz by one of the most melodic of bassists. Joe Henderson, Roland Hanna and Billy Cobham support Carter on his own happy-sad compositions.

6. Joni Mitchell, Court and Spark (Asylum 7F-1001). An excellent

album from the premier poetess of folk-rock. Her neurotic, hopeful-cynical verse is supported by her most musically sophisticated back-up yet. Not even tinny AM radio could destroy the wonderful songs on the album.

7. Bonnie Raitt, Takin' My Time (Warner Bros. BS 2729). The most polished album yet by the queen of blues singers. Her strong, sexy voice is backed by great arrangements of foot-stomping and tear-jerking material.

8. Van Morrison, It's Too Late To Stop Now, (Warner Bros. 2BS 27609). A two-record document of Morrison's spectacular tour of two summers ago. His vocal acrobatics and impeccable timing are supported by a very tight group led by Jack Schroer. A wide range of material from Morrison's fascinating past.

9. Jackson Browne, Late For The Sky (Asylum 7ES 1017). The third album from the leading exponent of middle-class rock. Well-wrought lyrics and sensible music are the vehicle for the apocalyptic vision of one of folk-rock's most underrated performers.

10. Randy Newman, Good Old Boys (Warner Bros. MS 2193). A musical trip through America's sordid past, featuring Huey Long, Calvin Coolidge et al. Intelligent, cynical lyrics and innovative music by the finest songwriter this side of Dylan.

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