

Watering Down on Wax

Children Want and Can Take the Best

MARIA CIMINO

THE EXUBERANT outpouring of records for children during the last few years and the recent frantic efforts to fill the reservoir before Mr. Petrillo's new ban goes into effect leave no doubt of the widespread awareness that the entertainment and education of children is an exceedingly profitable enterprise. Unfortunately, there is little indication as yet of an equal awareness that the making of records for children is a responsibility; that children's minds need good nourishment as much as their bodies do.

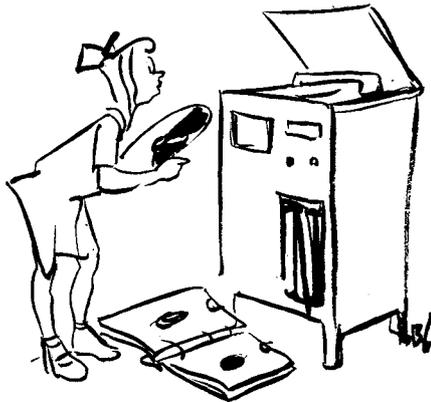
Prospective buyers, hunting the right record for a child, are confronted with a circus of lures: high-pressure advertising, elaborate packaging, the exploitation of big names from the stage and screen and radio. How many have the time and patience and knowledge to cut through this pretentious camouflage and see the shoddiness and inadequacy of the average product? It is not surprising, then, that so many manufacturers of records, sometimes draping themselves in the mantles of educators, have been able to foist their vulgar and hackneyed adulterations of story and music upon an unprepared and preoccupied public. The children need good records. The parents want good records. But good intentions go for nothing in a field where standards are not clear and the pressure of big business is persistent.

The root of the difficulty is the comparative newness of the industry and its growing tendency to model itself upon (or take shape under the same pressures as) the other new entertainment industries, the movies and the radio. The makers of children's records are on the same road towards the submergence of artist and educator and the dominance of mass production and advertising. Walt Disney and the depressing uncles and bogeymen of radio are the prevailing guides and we are in for an era of recorded goo and bla, unless the few hopeful tendencies now visible on the scene grow much stronger.

And yet, in the field of children's books there is a prime example of how children's needs can be met properly and without sacrifice of profits. Despite occasional forays from

the movies and radio, the bulk of books for children is still being produced by the established book publishers. And what a good job for children they do, compared with the movies and radio and recording companies! Children's book departments are in the hands of experienced editors who know their field and take pride in their work. Taste, judgment, imagination, and insight into children's likes and interests are permitted to operate without losing touch with the market and yet without being swamped by shortsighted greed. The leading children's book departments avoid the shallow temptation of quick returns and the corresponding early mortality implicit in specious novelty and rapidly transient fads. The best writers, illustrators, and designers available are encouraged and aided to make books of solid worth and lasting appeal.

If any of the recording companies is ever to get out a list from which a buyer of taste and intelligence can choose the right record for his child, instead of the present hodgepodge of trash with an occasional good or passable record, it must bring to the task a minimum equipment of imagination, good taste, knowledge of children, and knowledge of art. All the good stories and music in the world, from the first nursery songs heard in the cradle onward, are a child's rightful heritage. And he should get them straight. What makes any record maker think that tales like "Little Red Riding Hood" or "The Three Little Pigs," which have stood the test of centuries of telling, now have to be made maudlin or saccharine before a child can understand or enjoy them? How many



parents will admit their children are dullards or fools? Will they continue buying records fashioned for dolts, in which mincing voices mouth condescending inanities?

Children lack only experience. They have all the alertness, receptivity, and intelligence they will ever have. Experience can but quicken or retard their natural gifts. Unless their natural appetite is destroyed or deformed by constant poor provender, they want the best and they want it straight. Ask any children's librarian if you can fob off a fancy compilation of pseudo-scientific fripperies on a boy interested in machinery. The youngest child coming into a library knows his planes and trains well enough not to be fooled. He goes on searching till he finds the book he wants.

Listening to music on records should extend the child's enjoyment and knowledge of music. The records should be planned by specialists who know the audience for which they are intended and the realities of their world. The best in substance and performance should be made available, without condescension, to the music audience of tomorrow. Whatever forms are presented, symphony or folk song, opera or jazz, should be given at their true level and without infiltration from the vulgarizations of the screen or radio.

THE MOST promising approach to these standards in this year's output of music for children was attained by two minor firms. Disc in the "Young Folksay Series" presents American folk music that is sound in quality, straightforward and attractive in performance. The composers and performers, Woody Guthrie, Peter Seeger, Leadbelly, and others, know their material intimately and give it without fanfare and pretense, but with the utmost naturalness and grace. The Young People's Record Club, working along different lines, has a good program in which progressive educators and musicians are trying an integrated approach to the musical development of young children. Their records, planned for pre-school and elementary school children, are fresh, musically sound, and interesting.

The major firms turned out a few good things, but mostly on more conservative lines. Decca has a fine new "Peter and the Wolf" with Frank Luther as narrator and an excellent album of French folk songs with Louis Chartier. Whether or not one likes the performance (I don't particularly), Columbia's "Hansel and Gretel" is the real opera and not a tasteless dilution, and that is what children are entitled to. Columbia also has a first-rate new work, Britten's "Young Person's

Guide to the Orchestra." I know nothing expressly written for children, since "Peter and the Wolf," as good as this. Victor specially packages for children some of its suitable Red Seals.

Students of public taste will be interested in the chief musical atrocities of the season. Classic in its "Young People's Opera House" series reduces grand opera to bad musical comedy. In its latest issue Offenbach's scintillating aria for coloratura is deformed into a patter song which is supposed to introduce children to the "Tales of Hoffman." Vox in its "Music Appreciation Discs" provides introductions for children to the work of famous composers in the form of poorly selected and played pieces interspersed with biographical comments by well-known actors. Its latest issue on Schumann is as dull as its predecessors. Musicraft does the "Nutcracker Suite," "Sorcerer's Apprentice," and a selection from "Peer Gynt" brown; the listener has the choice of being bored by Milton Cross on the first two or irritated by Artie Shaw on the last. Bad as all these are, they rarely sound such depths as the comic-strip titles turned out by Capitol, Crown, and others. "Bugs Bunny," "Happy the Humbug," "Bozo and the Circus," are typical specimens; shoddy music, clumsy comedy, and an utter lack of all point characterize these immigrants from the radio steerage.

The best storytelling on records is done by Gudrun Thorne-Thomsen, an artist with sound knowledge of her field and great talent. Her first records, made under the sponsorship of the American Library Association in 1944, included some of the Norse hero and folk tales, and "Sleeping Beauty." Victor is producing stories taken from her collection "East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon." "When the Husband Kept House," "The Farmer's Bride," and "The Pancake" are superb tellings, full of wisdom and humor, and will entertain any child or adult. Frank Luther is her closest competitor. His excellent work on Decca records almost equals hers for natural and easy delivery, and regard for the integrity of the material. I have mentioned his "Peter and the Wolf" above and his "Babar" is just as good.

There is a fallow field awaiting any maker of records who has the courage to set his standards high, aim at true art, and steer clear of vulgarity and condescension. The year's product is top-heavy at a low level, but there is enough progress in the right direction to afford some hope for the future.

Maria Cimino is associate librarian in charge of the central children's room of the New York Public Library.

Le Jazz Lukewarm

HUGUES PANASSIE

ALL ART forms are constantly changing. Jazz music is no exception. It has been changing at an incredible speed since its birth. Some jazz critics would have us believe that every new change is an improvement. This is not true. It is a mistake to believe that art always progresses. This is true only of science, where every new discovery helps those who follow.

In music, it is not so: the main thing is the artistic gift. When a great musician dies, his work may inspire other musicians, but, if they are not as gifted as he was, their music won't be so great. Otherwise, any modern composer for the concert hall would be better than Bach or Mozart.

Jazz music is not better or worse today than jazz music of twenty years ago. It may have improved as far as instrumental technique is concerned, for jazz musicians have been working hard on their instruments, but that is all. The inspiration does not depend on a definite period.

If we consider jazz music of today generally, we immediately notice that there are a lot of different styles—more than there ever were. In the first place, there are musicians who stick to the good old tradition of jazz. But, in this category, we find two very different types: first, musicians who content themselves with a carbon copy of what was done in the old days. To this category belong most of the small groups which are referred to as "Dixieland-style" bands (or even Nicksieland at times!), or very old musicians like Bunk Johnson, who, for instance, plays the very same

stuff he was playing forty years ago but without the virtues he probably had in his youth: at least, his Victor records are very poor music and can only justify criticisms made against the New Orleans style by some critics.

In the other category, we also find great old-time musicians, or their disciples, who still use the original idiom of jazz, known as New Orleans style, but with new and inspired ideas instead of repeating the same thing. Good examples of this are the wonderful "King Jazz" records made by Milton Mezzrow and Sidney Bechet, such as "Gone Away Blues," "Out of the Gallion," "Ole Miss." A new tonal balance is obtained by the use of a soprano sax and clarinet in the melody section; these New Orleans-style records differ very much from the old ones, although they are full of the same musical spirit. Other examples are some of Louis Armstrong's new Victor records. For instance, the wonderful last ensemble chorus (entirely improvised) of "Where the Blues Were Born in New Orleans" has the old traditional balance (trumpet-trombone-clarinet) but the way Louis, Kid Ory, and Barney Bigard play is very different from Louis's old records, though just as great. Baby Dodds's wonderful drum solos, "Drum Improvisation No. I" (Circle), "Spooky Drums," "Tom Tom Work Out" (Disc), are another example of New Orleans-style records of a kind that had never been done before.

NOW, LET us consider the musicians who developed new forms from the first style of jazz. In this category, two great big bands, Fletcher Henderson's and Duke Ellington's, gave birth to the good "arranged" style of jazz, which has been very happily developed since. Today, this style is represented at its best by Count Basie and Lionel Hampton's bands—also by orchestras such as Erskine Hawkins's and Cootie Williams's. Here, we have powerful ensembles and repeated riffs, mixed with improvised solos backed by other riffs. The value of this type of music depends above all on the "beat" it is played with. Basie's band is wonderful at that. Such records as "The Mad Boogie," "The King," "Mutton Leg," (all three on Columbia) and "One O'Clock Boogie" (on Victor) are among the best records he has made

