

The "Empress" Still Reigns

by STANLEY DANCE

From first to last, from "Down Hearted Blues" to "Down in the Dumps," there is a commanding authority in all the records made by Bessie Smith, "The Empress of the Blues." One hundred sixty sides, all that are known to exist, are now miraculously in the process of being re-issued by Columbia, in five sets of two LPs, each generously priced at \$5.98. The first (GP-33) contains her sixteen earliest and sixteen last recordings, programed in such a way that with the project's completion it will be possible to enjoy her entire output chronologically on an automatic changer. This is the ideal representation of a great artist's legacy, made possible on the one hand by the fact that it all belongs to a single record company and, on the other, by the influence and long-standing enthusiasm of John Hammond.

In the Twenties, Bessie Smith was the popular idol of the black masses. Millions of her records were sold, and their success reputedly helped lift Columbia out of receivership at a time when the record industry's future was extremely doubtful. In the Thirties, primarily through the recommendations of musicians, she was discovered slowly and too late by a white audience seeking the "roots" of jazz. It was easy to become addicted to her singing then, and at one time collectors paid as much for a single 78 as will now be necessary to acquire the ten-LP empire.

Her death in 1937 brought her career to a tragic close. The dramatic and appalling facts of it are not quite as generally accepted, nor as used by Edward Albee in his play *The Death of Bessie Smith*. The story was straightened out to some extent in a 1969 *Esquire* article, "The True Death of Bessie Smith," by Sally Grimes, who had questioned Dr. Hugh Smith, a past president of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. Smith was the Memphis surgeon who tended the singer alongside the Mississippi highway after her car had plowed into a truck. He was accustomed to dealing with accident victims, and in his view Bessie "didn't have a prayer to survive" even "if she'd been hurt with her injuries on the front step of the University Hospital in Memphis." She was not



—Van Vechten

Bessie Smith—"immense authority."

bleeding to death, but had sustained "very severe injuries to her chest and abdomen." What made the situation even more nightmarish was that another car crashed into the surgeon's just as he was preparing to take her into Clarksdale. He now had three patients, including, he said, "a gentleman who had wrapped his chest over the steering wheel and a lady in the right front seat of his car who was clear up under the instrument panel." One of the members of Bessie Smith's accompanying band, who came on the scene in a bus shortly afterward, has confirmed that "the white doctor did all he could to help her." But what really happened after the ambulances arrived probably will never be known.

More important today is the consideration of Bessie Smith's artistry and her place in twentieth-century music. She was one of a group of female singers who have been misleadingly labeled "classic blues singers." Why none of their influential male contemporaries was "classic" has never been satisfactorily explained, nor has the fact that the "classic" ladies went out of fashion suddenly and almost simultaneously, at least so far as records were concerned.

Bessie Smith certainly deserved the adjective. So did her nearest rival, the unrelated Clara Smith. So did her men-

tor, "Ma" Gertrude Rainey, who was to Bessie what "King" Joe Oliver was to Louis Armstrong. The rest, "classics" by association, singers such as Mamie Smith, Ida Cox, Chippie Hill, Sippie Wallace, Viola McCoy, and Edith Wilson, were not really of their stature. Among the reasons sometimes advanced for their relegation to obscurity, besides radio, the "talkies," and the decline of vaudeville, are the Depression and the growing sophistication of black audiences. None is worth much consideration.

Male blues singers like Leroy Carr, Lonnie Johnson, and Big Bill Broonzy, who were less securely established in the 1920s, survived the Depression. Memphis Minnie, Mary Johnson, and Lil Johnson began their recording careers in 1929 and enjoyed varying popularity throughout the 1930s. Victoria Spivey recorded from 1926 to 1937 and is still active as proprietor of a blues recording company. Georgia White made nearly a hundred sides for Decca between 1935 and 1941, while Merline Johnson, the "Yas Yas Girl," made a similar number for Vocalion. Although Bessie Smith was immeasurably superior to any of these, orders from the pressing plant for two of her 1932 Columbia releases were for 800 and 400 copies respectively. And when she was recorded for the last time, in 1933, it was for an English jazz series!

On this final session, the jazz accompaniment—especially the trumpet playing of Frank Newton—was impressive; so were the songs written by two friends of hers, the vaudeville team of Coot Grant and Socks Wilson; but in sum the music was not addressed to the *blues* audience of the time. It reflected the singer's insistence on what annotator Chris Albertson terms (in the informative booklet accompanying the Columbia set) a "stylistic departure from her famous blues recordings." This suggests that it was not the audience but Bessie Smith who was growing relatively more sophisticated.

If true, it would not be surprising, because in the course of a life in vaudeville theaters, tent shows, gin mills, and nightclubs, she had been exposed to a good deal of sophistication of one kind or another. For example, musicians with whom she recorded, such as Fletcher Henderson, James P. Johnson, and Don Redman, however personally sympathetic, were attuned to the city rather than to the plantation. Bessie herself was born in Chattanooga, a city of 30,000, and made her home in Philadelphia from 1918 onward. Although she was still touring the South when the fatal accident occurred, and although she was perhaps most appreciated there, it is a fact that country values constantly reasserted them-

Recordings Reports II

Miscellaneous LPs

Data

Report

Dvořák: Quintet in G (Op. 77); Waltzes (Op. 54, Nos. 1 and 4). Members of the Philharmonic Octet. Philips stereo, 802851, \$5.98.

For all that the composer's designation for this work was Opus 18 (his publisher arbitrarily dubbed it Opus 77, on the premise that it would sell better if it was believed to be a later work), it is one of the great compositions of its kind. That kind is somewhat different from the quintets of Schubert and Brahms, in that Dvořák preferred to add a double bass to the quartet rather than doubling the viola or cello. The outcome in such a robust performance as this one is a throbbing wash of sonority over the multicolored texture of Dvořák's

melodic and harmonic ideas. Now and then, as in the *Allegro vivace* (Scherzo), one would welcome more resilience and flexibility, but the other values are so strong that further complaint would be quibbling. The players (Alfred Malecek and Rudolf Hartmann, violins; Kunio Tsuchiya, viola; Heinrich Majowski, cello; and Rainer Zepperitz, bass) are at their best in the Finale, a broadly striding movement that gives us Dvořák in his best quasi-Schubert mood. The waltzes are equally well reproduced.

Dvořák: Sonata (Op. 57); Sonatina (Op. 100); "Four Romantic Pieces." Henri Temianka, violin; with Gerald Robbins, piano. Orion stereo, ORS 7020, \$5.98.

The line of separation among a movement Dvořák considered suitable for a sonata, a sonatina, or one of four "Romantic Pieces" is not always easy to draw, but the problem is largely a semantic one. Taken as music, almost every one of the dozen movements on the two sides is animated by the same kind of sincerity and talent, musicality and craftsmanship as every other. And whether it is the movement of the Sonatina known in the Kreisler edition as "Indian Lament," the third (Larghetto) of the "Romantic Pieces," or the finale

of the Sonata, it is the kind of Dvořák that has contributed to putting his name among the most popular composers in any category. Though Temianka's violin sound has not been heard on records as often as it should, it leaves nothing to be desired in richness, suitability to the material at hand, or responsiveness to the player's will. Temianka's excellent musicianship draws wholehearted concurrence from his younger associate at the piano. The recording is among those noted as "released under the auspices of the Yehudi Menuhin Foundation."

Haydn: Trios (Op. 53, Nos. 1, 2, and 3). **Schubert:** Trios in B flat (D. 581 and D. 471). Arthur Grumiaux, violin; Georges Janzer, viola; and Eva Czako, cello. Philips stereo, 802905, \$5.98.

In addition to carving out a reputation for the best string trio not composed of members of the same family (the brothers Pasquier remain the all-time paragons), Arthur Grumiaux seems bent on carving out segments of the trio literature rarely, if ever, heard. Such are the Haydn trios whose origin may be disputed (they contain the same musical materials as the piano sonatas Nos. 40-42 of 1784) but which impress me as string writing and nothing else. In any case, they provide a sideful of lovely listening,

led by Grumiaux with the artistry and enthusiasm that are the hallmarks of his musical personality. The Schubert trios of 1816-17, when he was approaching twenty, permit somewhat greater latitude for the viola and cello, but they are essentially violin solos with support by two others. When the composer is Schubert and the violinist is Grumiaux, who is to complain? Not this listener. The group might be in the room, so good and well balanced is the reproduction.

Liszt: "Sonetto 104 del Petrarca"; Balade No. 2 in B minor; "Sonetto 123 del Petrarca"; "Vallée d'Obermann"; *Valse oubliée* No. 1 in F-sharp major; "Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este." Claudio Arrau, piano. Philips stereo, 802906, \$5.98.

Long before he had attained his present rank as a Beethoven-Schumann-Brahms player, Arrau was widely known for the artistry of his Liszt. Indeed, as long ago as the late Thirties, the performance on a Decca disc of "Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este" by the otherwise unknown Arrau prompted a desire to know more about a performer capable of such execution. This version shows the advances in imagery to be

expected over the length of time involved, without any decline in facility or precision. In both respects it is typical of the immaculate pianism coupled with interpretative insight that characterize one of the best Liszt recitals of recent years. For those unacquainted with it, the "Vallée d'Obermann" is an especially moody kind of Liszt, brooding and expressive. Very good piano reproduction, also.

Mozart: Serenades in E flat (K. 375) and C minor (K. 388). The Netherlands Wind Ensemble. Philips stereo, 802907, \$5.98.

These are two performances of solid attributes, including well-matched merits among the instrumentalists represented. They are Han de Vries and Carlo Ravelli, oboes; George Pieteron and Hans Mossel, clarinets; Joop Meijer and Jan Peeters, horns; and Joep Terwey and Henk de Wit, bassoons. Now and then a line is pushed slightly off pitch, but for the most part it is clean, well-balanced execution. What it is not, to a similar degree, is interesting, freshly spirited interpretation. The C-minor has a more authoritative air for the reason

that its serious, weighty content accords better with the temperament of the players. This means that the lighter, more jocular E-flat doesn't get all the life and animation becoming to it. The temptation would be to attribute this to the interpretative preference of Edo de Waart, who is identified as the conductor. However, the style of the playing suggests that de Waart functions primarily as a time-beater, as a unifier of a concept developed by the players themselves. The reproduction is very good. —I.K.